THE CONSPIRACY OF SPEECH

by

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THE MISCOMMUNICATION TRILOGY
"The Conspiracy of Speech, Vol. I."
Second part

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2026

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1. Preface: THE CONSPIRACY OF SPEECH

'Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness'.

— Samuel Beckett

'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language'.

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

'Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality'.

— Joseph Conrad

'Language is the most imperfect and expensive means yet discovered for communicating thought'.

— William James

'I carry the corpses of three dead languages in every word I use'.

— Fritz Mauthner

1.1. The language crisis

On Mauthner's shoulders

Fritz Mauthner's 'Contributions to a Critique of Language' (Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache, 1901) was largely dismissed by his peers, leaving him disillusioned and weary of journalism as a 'a trade with words' (Worthandel). He argued that every philosophical problem is really a problem of language, and that true insight requires not reforming our words but dismantling them as instruments of knowledge. This loss of faith in speech finds an echo in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 1902 'Lord Chandos Letter', where the narrator abandons all attempts at coherent expression and resolves to write no more. The refusal to use language as an end point of wisdom and a highest point of human life can be find in Tao Te Ching. What can be spoken is not the unchanging way of nature. The name that can be named is not eternal. What is without a name is the endless source of everything. What has a name gives rise to all things in the transient world. Because all things are temporary. Naming all things is pointless. Human language is just a tool and has its limits. Full complexity of life cannot be named. Knowledge of life must transcend the limits of language. At Vienna's fin de siècle, Mauthner influenced thinkers like Ernst Mach and Ludwig Wittgenstein, but remained convinced that even logical analysis is doomed. Because logic itself is just another language. He warned of a collective 'word superstition' (wortaberglaube) that treats words as fetishes and pseudo-concepts. People

use these ready-made slogans and phrases forgetting that meaning lives only in our remembered use of language as personal interaction. Abstract grammar and vocabulary, Mauthner held, negate the richness of sensory experience. In his sceptical nominalism, epistemology becomes the critique of language: an endless task of tearing down each rung of the linguistic ladder until nothing remains but the raw material of thought itself. Not abstract thoughts of non-existing entities but concrete thoughts of personal interaction between people and physical experience with nature. Mauthner's radical rejection of speech challenges his followers to demolish the very structures that shape our understanding—a true critique of language that seeks freedom beyond words. Because all things and words are temporary and transient. In the words of Lao Tzu: 'To attain knowledge, add things every day. To attain wisdom, remove things every day'. True knowledge of life lies in the tendencies not the facts.

Mauthner argued that every piece of so-called knowledge is merely a tautology rehearsing what we already sense, since all words originate in our observations of the external world, including our own bodies. He held that mind and body are themselves linguistic constructs, and that psychology can never escape this circle. Thinking then is just a silent speaking, and any attempt to describe an inner language collapses into words borrowed from physical experience. Language, in his view, is an inherently imprecise, temporary tool whose logic cannot transcend its own structures. By exposing the gap between words and reality, Mauthner radicalised scepticism: no statement can convey new truth, and every abstract concept only reflects our habitual use of terms. Every eloquent analysis is just another form of temporary borrowing meanings from our experience and thus equally doomed to failure. His famous injunction—to dismantle language rung by rung—challenges us to abandon the illusion that words can fully capture existence. When we say 'I exist', we make a linguistic claim, not proof, and we can just as easily imagine the non-existent without creating it. Once one recognise 'the limits of his own language', he must also accept that those limits are self-imposed and that true understanding begins where his words run out.

In 'Mauthner's Critique of Language' Gershon Weiler insists that Ludwig Wittgenstein stands on Fritz Mauthner's shoulders: without Mauthner there would be no later turn to language's limits. Wittgenstein's Vienna or Fin-de-siècle Vienna became a proving ground for world-shaking critique, as Loos, Mach, Klimt, Mahler, Freud, Musil, and Karl Kraus joined a radical reassessment of art, society and thought under the fading Habsburg allodial order. Fritz Mauthner's apocalyptic essays in the Berliner Tageblatt sparked a movement of Sprachskepsis, exposing language's corruption and its ever-widening gap from lived reality. Language scepticism has spread and reflected the zeitgeist in Europe. Joyce and Beckett, reading Mauthner together, turned to primitive directness and the silence between phrases, while Proust lamented that experience remains hermetic even when memory tries to recapture it. Balzac's unpublished 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women' mocked mechanistic characterisations, and every writer in Vienna grappled with the tyranny of words—vowing to climb the ladder of language only to shatter each rung beneath them. Robert Musil's 'Posthumous Papers of a Living Author' not only examines modernity's crushing effect on the individual but also records various forms of decline he witnessed in the ferment of fin de siècle Vienna. At a time when the Ringstraße cafés hosted debates on psychoanalysis, music, and philosophy, Musil perceived language itself slipping into banality. Echoing idea that words often stand for nothing but themselves, Musil mocks the clichés plastered on postcards and laments how statues serve merely as waymarks. Monuments that do not stir the imagination bearing sterile inscriptions of name and date. Musil's unease resonates with Ludwig Wittgenstein's later insistence that meaning arises only through use: when language becomes a series of empty sign-vehicles, the

magic of lived experience leaks away. Mauthner's warning is that lofty terms and abstractions detach us from physical experience of life. For example the word harmony(n.) meaning 'combination of tones pleasing to the ear; concord of sounds', or 'agreement, accord, harmonious relations' and 'settled government, order', but also literally 'means of joining', used of ship-planks, etc., also related to 'harmos' -'fastenings of a door; joint, shoulder', from PIE root *ar- 'to fit together'. How come the concrete physical objects of ship-planks and fastenings of a door became abstract ideas of concord of sounds, harmonious relations, and agreement of feeling? Does harmony exist in the physical world or is it only a word that stands for nothing? The scientific optimism—its faith in quantification and psychoanalytic categorisation—turns everyday speech into technical jargon. Robert Musil sensed the danger of an overly abstract scientific worldview. Musil's essays map the collapse of language and culture in the twilight of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, reflecting Mauthner's scepticism about empty words and anticipating Wittgenstein's philosophy of meaning as use. They all understood that critique alone cannot free people: language is alive in our minds, an act that binds thought even as it makes thought possible, and the task is to face the unknown experience that lies beyond every utterance. This shared confrontation with language's limits became the birthplace of a philosophy that seeks its ultimate home not in words but in the silence that follows.

In 'James Joyce and Fritz Mauthner: Multilingual Liberators of Language'[1] Maria Kager argues that both Fritz Mauthner and James Joyce sought to transgress language's confines, holding silence as the ultimate ideal. Mauthner extended his critique to its furthest limits, declaring language worthless as a path to knowledge—merely poetry, propaganda, and the seedbed of new dogmas. He confessed to carrying 'the corpses of three languages'(German, Czech and Hebrew) in every word he used, warning that most people, enchanted by an arbitrary code, remain trapped by the illusion of objective truth. Liberation, he insisted, demands not reform but destruction. thinkers must tear down each rung of the linguistic ladder, replacing words with memories as pure experience. Joyce embraced this destructive mission in declaring war on English, yet his battle was regenerative rather than terminal. By shattering 'coagulated' speech in works like 'Finnegans Wake', he aimed to return language to its raw, living state—renewed through chaos. Mauthner's uncompromising negation and Joyce's creative overhaul together redefine our relationship to speech, showing that only through both annihilation and reinvention people can reclaim its power of language.

Language of the unword

Shane Weller's 'Language and negativity in European modernism : toward a literature of the unword'[2] names a deliberate turn toward linguistic negativity, where writers strip language down to its limits and expose its failure as a vessel of thought. Samuel Beckett described his own words as a veil to be torn away, revealing only the silent 'nothings' beneath. Under James Joyce's guidance, Beckett read Fritz Mauthner's 'Critique der Sprache' and embraced three bleak insights: thinking is speaking, there is no truth beyond language, and the boundaries of expression are insurmountable. From this came a poetics of black comedy, nonsense, and absurdity—a systematic undoing of language's material weight that directly opposes Joyce's

[1] Kager, M. (2018). James Joyce and Fritz Mauthner: Multilingual Liberators of Language. The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory, 93(1), 39–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/00168890.2018.1396082

[2] Weller, S. (2019). Language and negativity in European modernism : toward a literature of the unword. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, Ny: Cambridge University Press.

exuberant wordplay in Finnegans Wake. Long before Beckett, German-speaking modernists such as Hofmannsthal had already diagnosed a crisis: bureaucratic dehumanisation and alienation were mirrored by linguistic decay. Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and radical writers—Pound, Céline, Eliot, Joyce—pursued innovations that severed the shared bond between author and reader, demanding a 're-education' in which difficulty itself became the highest value. Techniques like parataxis, fragmentation and epanorthosis dramatises speech's provisional nature and foreground the impossibility of pure communication. This negation extends into a broader literary underworld—Kafka's subterranean fictions, Bataille's transgressions, Artaud's visceral theatre, the nihilism of de Sade and Genet—where life and literature collapse into one another and silence takes on a demonic force. Echoing Gorgias the sophist, with his paradoxologia and playful anti-language, this planned obsolescence of language reveals communication as a doomed techne, forever teasing us with its own undoing. In times of linguistic decay humanity stripped itself of mastery over word or world, embracing barbarism as its only authentic refrain. In this landscape of 'unwording', language is not merely exhausted but weaponised against itself. The result is a 'language of the unword' that lives in negation, a testament to voice rendered obsolete and reborn through the very failure of speech.

Stéphane Mallarmé's late-19th-century experiments cast language as an epistemological disaster born of The Tower of Babel's multiplicity. Words, he argued, are arbitrary signs whose true power lies in the silences between them, much like music's interplay of beat and pause. Influenced by Schopenhauer, Mallarmé sought to purify everyday speech into an essential poetic form, a 'dialect of the tribe' refined to its musical core. Gustave Flaubert, a generation earlier, had already likened human language to 'a cracked kettledrum', producing hollow echoes where we crave cosmic music. Roland Barthes later saw in Flaubert the birth of European literature's problematics: the destruction of language until only its 'carcass' remains. Borges's 'Funes the Memorious' (1942) and Hofmannsthal's critique of generalisation underscore language's failure to grasp radical singularities, driving writers toward the nameless, the unrepeatable. Fritz Mauthner, overlooked in modern philosophy, diagnosed our 'prison house of language', insisting no experience can be fully captured by words. His radical scepticism found literary form in Samuel Beckett's vision of humanity in ruins—where utterance tears away veils only to reveal 'nothings' and where linguistic negativism enacts the demise of speech itself. The reader, confronted with fragmentation and self-undermining syntax, experiences language's decomposition firsthand, and with it a lost faith in human connection. Ultimately language becomes a barrier, a frosted glass between people. A tool for alienation that serves the masses but fails the two individuals that search simple contact. The trajectory from Mallarmé to Mauthner charts a profound crisis: language, once the bond of mind to world, becomes its own undoing, a crisis that demands we confront the unword beneath every utterance.

After Joyce's exuberant exploration of language's possibilities, Beckett pushed English to the brink of unreadability, suggesting that doing nothing still counts as doing something—existence without the burden of meaning or purpose. For Beckett 'every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness', or something to be avoided. He even gave a silent interview for the Swedish TV after winning the Nobel Prize. As a writer and even more as a human, he found that had nothing to express. So his goal became expressing emptiness. The void of expression in Samuel Beckett's drama renders palpable the chasm between our innermost longings and the inadequate language we wield. The stage is filled with words that ring hollow or verge on the nonsensical. In 'Waiting for Godot', Vladimir laments their endless 'idle discourse', a chatter that never bridges hope and reality. Estragon's plaintive refrain,

'Nothing to be done', does not signal an absence of possible action but rather insists that nothing can ever truly be accomplished—an inevitability of stasis sealed by speech itself. Beckett's sparse dialogue exposes how language betrays desire and imposes a perpetual impasse, where talking becomes both refuge and prison, and the very act of expression confirms the futility it seeks to overcome.

'It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and style. To me they have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it - be it something or nothing - begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today'.

— Samuel Beckett, The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 1, 1929-1940

Beckett made it his mission to show that silence and absence can carry as much weight as sound and speech. Beckett's plays treat inaction and stillness not as voids but as profound interventions, questioning the crave of structure, order, and emotional triggers in art. They remind that words and images are merely prompts for chemical reactions in the body, and that beyond those reactions lies a raw materiality of brain and bone. Indeed, 'Nothing is to be done'. Etymologically, 'nothing' combines Old English nan ('not one') with thing, referring not to nonexistence but to an entity devoid of consequence. To express true emptiness in language is therefore to embrace silence, to let the unspoken speak for itself. In this way, Beckett's linguistic negativism reveals nothingness as a presence rather than an absence. To express nothing is to honour silence itself, allowing emptiness to become its own form of expression. But how to express nothing? If words lose any fixed meaning, then language can refuse its own logic. The primary tool of meaning could no longer convey what it is intended. Confronted with silence or nothingness, the choice is to harness it rather than ignore it. There is no empty space or time. But the feeling of emptiness cannot be expressed with words. Words are unnecessary stains on silence. Speaking only forestall the experience of the true void. The paradox of expressing nothing lies in this very tension: to achieve silence we must speak, even as our words carry the absence they seek to reveal. Beckett's Unnamable voice drifts without name, place, or purpose—asserting existence through ceaseless, rambling speech. Speech becomes survival, a bulwark against death's ultimate silence. By focusing on bodily processes—the breath, the heart, the act of speaking—both artists strip away any higher meaning, showing that our acts of communication serve only to sustain life itself. Beckett's 'literature of the unword' exposes speech's inevitable failure, while it may awaken us to life's immediacy. Failure to express something becomes the most potent way to express everything. The nameless is the origin of all things. Silence reveals that absence itself speak louder.

The limits of my word

In 'Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the limits of language'[3] Linda Ben-Zvi reveals how both placed language at the heart of their work only to methodically expose its failure.

[3] Ben-Zvi, L. (1980). Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language. PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 95, 183 - 200.

Beckett, reading Mauthner to a nearly blind Joyce, learnt that every claim—even 'I exist'—depends on words that cannot secure certainty. Mauthner, still largely untranslated, insisted that self-existence, thought, and philosophy are all linguistic constructions doomed to tautology. Proust found words no more than inadequate vehicles, and Beckett's theatre of the absurd grapples with the very problems language creates: how to question reality with tools that shape and restrict it. 'Poe's Law' says that if something is extreme enough, it is hard to tell whether it is a parody or serious—and people often confuse the two. Listening, speaking, thinking, writing, and reading can become exercises in 'Poe's Law', where intent is unreadable and parody can masquerade as sincerity. Without an unmistakable signal of the author's intention, any satirical or parodic statement of extreme beliefs may be taken by some readers as a genuine expression of those beliefs. It reminds us that, in the absence of clear contextual clues, even the most exaggerated mimicry can be misconstrued as sincerity. Mauthner and Beckett armed us with the means to dismantle all thought systems, even irrationalism, by revealing their shaky verbal foundations. In the end, philosophy itself proves a futile loop of words asking after words. Only by scrutinising the language of philosophers meaning re-forms. Recognising the limits of language is the first step beyond its confines, where words end and whatever lies beyond may begin.

Speaking can be a bad habit. Language, by its nature, is imprecise and always in constant flux. Words shift in meaning over time and lose the power to capture the full richness of our thoughts or experiences. Misunderstandings are not accidents but inevitable outcomes of this 'banal origin of meaning', as words function like religious rites—arbitrary, floating signs whose significance depends entirely on shared use. Philosophical puzzles often stem from treating these signs as fixed bridges to reality rather than provisional tools. As Wittgenstein put it, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent', for every attempt to pin down existence in language risks distorting the very world it seeks to describe. To confront these limitations, thinkers must move beyond mere reform of grammar and vocabulary into a realm of meta-linguistics, acknowledging the gap between word and thing. Some truths evade words entirely and reveal themselves only through laughter's spontaneous outburst or the pregnant pause of silence. Laughter breaks the strictures of syntax to convey joy, irony, or dissent, while silence—vocal in its own right—marks respect, contemplation, or refusal. Both remind us that communication transcends the boundaries of spoken language and that meaning often lives in what we do not, or cannot, say.

Is thinking just speaking? Thought and speech are inseparable: thinking occurs only as an act of speaking—whether aloud, in inner voice, or through writing—and each utterance is a unique movement that cannot be perfectly repeated. Words do more than dress up preexisting ideas; their sound can transform a statement, convey moods or hidden desires, or even exist as pure noise or song. Language need not refer to an external reality: its signs arise solely from the speaker's activity and intention. Since all knowledge springs from sensory experience, and those sensations take shape as mental representations, every act of thought is already speech. When we say, 'I exist', we wield two linguistic creations—'I' and 'exist'—whose meanings live not in the physical world but in the network of human brains and intentions. A word gains significance only in its use by a speaker and in its reception by a listener; isolated sound structures or grammar rules remain dead until animated by human purpose. Ordinary language, flawed though it is, remains our only medium for expressing feeling, mood, and the subtle nuances of experience. Its highest form is poetry, where words return to their origin as song, suggesting the ineffable rather than asserting literal truth. If thinking is always speaking, then to deny speech is to deny thought itself—there is no thinking without speaking.

What if truth is just a belief? Fritz Mauthner held that truth is nothing more than coherence within the shifting conventions of ordinary language: only what our words can plainly express counts as true, and tautologies—statements like 'the water is wet'—merely rehearse familiar habits without adding new knowledge. Thomas Hobbes put it simply: belief is called truth, because every judgment depends on the words we choose. For Mauthner, the lowest form of knowledge lives in these linguistic tautologies; the highest lies in laughter, and the final liberating act is the silence that follows when words expire of their own weight. He extended this scepticism to the foundations of science: Euclidean geometry, he argued, only fits our sensory conditions by contingent convenience, and it's purely formal inferences cannot deepen our understanding of the world. More broadly, every philosophy is a humanistic picture of reality, shaped by the anthropomorphic biases embedded in language. We remain captives of its arbitrary structures—ciphers in our own heads—and even mystics, who cloak themselves in unsayable unity, merely replace one set of linguistic conventions with another. As Nietzsche's poetic seductions show, when thinkers mistake their own artful language for theory, they abandon the critique they most need. If belief is called truth, then to question our words is to question the very truths we hold—and to glimpse the silence that lies beyond them.

Heidegger's portrayal of language as the 'house of Being' emphasises its fundamental role in shaping human existence, situating our understanding and experience of reality. But language serves much more than our everyday practical needs. It real power is when we try to speak of what lies beyond direct experience. Language can turn beliefs into truths. The goal of language is to start manipulating ourselves. In contrast, silence alone cannot mislead; it merges with nature's own muteness. If you use language long enough you inevitably will create a kind of religion as a peak point. Language is the dwelling place of all gods. God is born as a voice and exist as a story. The mystic inner voice is torn between the silence and the urge to communicate itself, striving 'to say the unsayable'. The language readily shelters every imaginable god. Mythology is a story of oriented causal life, a vector with a meaningful end. Storytelling give us structure, and tools for understanding and judging. Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards, said Soren Kierkegaard. Only in retrospect the pieces of everyday life can form a coherent picture. There must be a shared believe that, somehow, those moments will link up in the days ahead.

According to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, the structure of our language shapes our worldview—how we think, how we organise our thoughts, and how we map reality. Our mental models, the very theories we hold about the world and ourselves, depend on the words and grammar available to us. Though scholars debate whether language determines these models outright or merely influences them, language and perception are inseparable: we see the world through the lens of our words. Society exploits this fact by turning language into an obstacle course that keeps us perpetually dissatisfied and eager to act. Language games are the way societies exist. We are coached through slogans and product narratives to believe, love, crave and desire. Words resonate with our values and anxieties and reshape our worldviews and steer our behaviour. Yet there are those who refuse to play this linguistic game. Unbound by conventional expectations, they destroy old rules and invent new ones. Through creative destruction, they offer an outside perspective on the very language games that define society. By recognising these 'language games', we can begin to see how words govern our desires and choices—and perhaps learn to speak and think beyond the barriers they impose.

Self-deception of language

The self-deception of language works only temporarily. Nature eventually breaks the narrative and transforms all thing and words in an endless cycles. You cannot trap the ineffable in words, and introspective dissection can never yield clarity. Creating meaning using storytelling is basically speaking about thinking. In his 'Philosophical Investigations' Wittgenstein famously said that 'philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is'. What about the language itself? In the end language can only describe reality. If humans can change nature inspired by words, it is only for a brief time. Every castle made of sand melts into the see. In the silence after the language the world will become again what it had been before speech. True reality lives in unarticulated experience, where no language games, identities, or distinctions between self and world are needed. Humanity's final response to indifference of nature is only silence, the purest critique of language. Silence is the ultimate god killer and the end of every ideology. It transcends language to embrace emptiness. In silence, nothing and yet everything becomes possible—no fixed truths, no exclusions; every utterance, however outlandish, finds its legitimacy. The linguistic cycle starts with simple speech that become increasingly complex while the building of the Tower of Babel in search of a conversation with God. At the end, the complex language becomes so incomprehensible that sounds like a babble. The tower of babble starts collapsing in laughter, irony, and ridicule. The home of God is no more. After the silence of the apocalypse the cycle starts again. If the word is indeed the home of gods, then in relinquishing words people return to the silent dwelling of the nature before gods.

The highest forms of critique of language are laughter and silence. No true criticism of language can be written in words, for every sentence only deepens our entanglement in speech. The only genuine rejection of words is laughter, a sudden rupture in the tyranny of meaning. Laughter does not explain or define; it frees us from our own verbal inventions and mocks the pretensions of every abstract system. In its contagious spontaneity—on stage, in opera, in the street—it shatters the illusion that language can ever capture life's immediacy. Yet even laughter falls short of the ultimate critique, which is silence. To cease speaking is to retreat from the endless treadmill of signifiers that race toward no milestone. Beckett's Waiting for Godot shows us that after every joke, every broken promise, there remains only the hush of expectation. In true silence, language dissolves back into pure presence, and we glimpse the mystery that words can never touch. As the weary philosopher Lucky laments, the scholar who believes insights may be wrung from language resembles a circus donkey elegantly pacing a wheel. Lured by promises of meaning and driven by the whip of theory, he works 'ever upward, in reality, ever in the same place'. Language knows no landmarks: every novel turn of phrase soon becomes obsolete, another rusted rung on the endless ladder of words. Linguistic puzzles only distract us from life's urgent needs. At the end, the practical is before the conceptual—shelter before syntax, solidarity before syllables. Existence precedes essence. While philosophers of language fret over imperfections in expression, countless human beings endure real hardship in factories and fields. Silence and laughter remind us of where our energies might better serve. The deepest truths of our being—our feelings, our living connection to nature—remain forever inaccessible to articulation. Every attempt to capture the mystical state in vocabulary only destroys its evanescent purity. Thus, the mystic's laughter and the artist's silent pause stand as the last, unutterable words. When words fail, laughter and silence emerge as our final critique of language. They expose the futility of endless discoursing and release us into immediacy. In their wake, we may turn our attention from the ghostly apparatus of speech to the pressing, unspoken needs of the living world.

If meaning in language is lost, the overall feeling of existence is over; truth and meaning must then be artificially created. The question is can anything truly exist without language? If nothing truly exists, language becomes our power to create from the void—crafting worlds that lie outside nature's bounds. Yet the effects of nonsense can rival or even surpass those of sober sense: any utterance is nonsense to someone who does not share its rules, for no meaning is fixed. Sense, rooted in perception and judgment, arises through interpretation—the Latin sentire ('to feel, to go') suggests a mental journey from sensation to understanding. Nonsense, by contrast, wears many masks—absurdity, drivel, folly—and serves as an indirect form of communication that undercuts its own coherence to expose the limits of reason. Wittgenstein observed in his preface to the 'Tractatus' that nonsense defines the boundary of language: propositions that overstep what can be said must resort to the nonsensical. His own system, he admitted, employs a self-refuting strategy—a deliberate nonsense—to gesture toward what lies beyond words. In this interplay, sense and nonsense are inseparable: each movement of meaning depends on the possibility of misstep, and every nonsensical turn highlights the fragile bridge between our words and any world they might describe. 'Non signification' reveals that in the dance of sense and nonsense, meaning is never a substance but a shimmering edge—where creation from nothing meets the silence beyond language. Words are not the measure of all things.

'The fish trap exists because of the fish. Once you've gotten the fish you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit. Once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning. Once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can talk with him?'

— *Zhuangzi, Chuang Tsu: Inner Chapters*

Society is its language. Words are the measure of people who use them. Even scientific theories do not unearth a pre-existing world but construct it through conceptual signs so that it becomes intelligible. Outside those constructs lies only disorder, for language alone orders our experience and spins the narratives we accept as real. Turning communication into a contest of manipulation or artifice—chasing novelty, power, or applause—reduces words to noise, erodes empathy and makes language an end rather than a bridge to another mind. Sign's meaning rests on the arbitrary link between name and sound, so any linguistic claim leaves language as the sole proof of existence. Language exists to create a community. The only useful meaning of words is their shared understanding. This put the individual in a difficult position. His lack of freedom is often a linguistic bondage under the watch of his inner speech. Freedom begins by stripping away every societal rule he can live without and identifying the few conditions essential to his happiness. Those very preconditions his inner dialogue has been trained to suppress. Societal language fears intellectual contentment, for once one finds meaning he lose the restlessness that fuels ambition and production. Instead, individuals are meant to remain perpetually incomplete, driven by unsatisfied needs and a compulsive search that never ends. The internal dissent mirrors the discord society demands. Through its language, society manufactures misunderstanding and division—an endless 'divide and rule' strategy that keeps people in motion and reproduces conflict. The moment a blessed stillness is attained, people become inert, ending the cycle of consumption and experiment that society depends on. Nothingness, that pause in motion, is anathema to the social order; instead, perpetual activity and consumption are pushed by voices that serve the system, not personal well-being. Society is not an ally, and neither are its agents who invade the mind with words designed to keep one discontented. Since society literally is its language, true freedom requires reclaiming an inner

dialogue—learning to speak and think in ways that defy perpetual unrest and rediscover the quiet core of genuine happiness. The self-deception of societal language is transitory.

Thinking as speaking

Is language the foundation of thought? Mauthner's critique rests on the claim that language itself—not merely a vehicle for expression or a speculative tool—occupies the foremost position in human thought. He argues that thought cannot exist apart from language. By converting every form of knowledge into a mode of speech, Mauthner effectively reduces thinking to habitual linguistic patterns, so that what we call knowledge is nothing more than the language we currently employ. Rather than granting us direct insight into reality, language reveals the diversity of human communities: each society, through its own tongue, embodies a distinct logic. Mauthner thus contends that the variety of linguistic structures gives rise to as many different logics as there are languages. Mauthner's perspective forces us to recognise language not as a mere tool but as the very substance of thought, shaping our knowledge and reflecting the plural logics of diverse cultures. In 'Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language' Linda Ben-Zvi indicates eight analogies between the two authors regarding the treatment of language: 1. Thinking and talking are one activity; 2. Language and memory are synonyms; 3. All language is metaphor; 4. There are no absolutes; 5. The ego is contingent; it does not exist apart from language; 6. Communication between men is impossible; 7. The only language should be simple language; 8. The highest forms of a critique of language are laughter and silence

Thinking and speaking are one activity! There is only language. Mauthner insists that thinking and speaking form a single activity: there is nothing but language. What we call thought is simply language in operation. There is no realm of thinking apart from words, and the notion of thinking as an inner, non-linguistic faculty is a lifeless symbol for what is in fact our capacity to use language. Men believe they think when they only speak. In this view, knowledge collapses into speech; thinking becomes a pattern of observable linguistic habits, nothing more than the current usage of a tongue. Because no one can master all languages, language does not grant universal insight; it merely displays the diversity of human societies. What we know is what we say, and our utterances reflect who we are and where we live. There is no single, underlying skeletal structure to all tongues, no singular logic. Instead, each language embodies its own logic, revealing the worldviews of its speakers. Knowledge is just a reflection of society. Samuel Beckett, in works such as 'The Unnamable' (1932), offers a literary answer to Mauthner's critique: let characters speak until their words become signs of the very failure of knowledge. Rather than conveying meaning, those utterances make visible the impossibility of stepping beyond language. Communication becomes a church of stale words, and each babble—each inability to articulate—is a testament to the limits of knowing. The narrator of 'The Unnamable' confesses, 'I am a big talking ball, talking about things that do not exist, or that exist perhaps, impossible to know, beside the point'. Yet as the voice persists—speaking while aware of its own falsity and indifference to content—it listens not to itself but to the silence beneath its words. These unfathomable abysses of silence are akin to the pauses amid a symphony: they reveal the necessary space in which speech arises. Words, though they apply to our situation, never bring us closer to true knowledge. Beckett's 'Fizzles' dramatises that all we need to say is already known, and beyond what is spoken there is nothing. The figure of failed communication, becomes the only art worth pursuing—a quiet despair born of recognising that reality remains forever out of reach. In accepting this, we enact a calm suicide of both thinking and speaking, a denial of self-deception. Language is not merely the tool of

thought but its very essence. Attempts to find an inner, pre-linguistic thinking betray the truth that all knowledge, all insight, is bound up in words. To confront this reality is to embrace both the impotence and the necessity of speech, and to live within the silence that makes language possible.

Language and memory are synonymous. According to Mauthner, both speech and thought originate in sense impressions—our recollections of what we have perceived. Memory serves as the bridge between raw sensory experience and language. The life of the soul, he argues, is nothing but memory; reason or conceptual thought is simply our soul's memory of its own impressions, articulated in words. Under this view, language is nothing more than an individual's record of experience. A personal memory. We so thoroughly confuse our memories of similar events with the concepts and words we use to describe them that it would often be clearer to speak of language instead of memory, and of words rather than recollections. Words stand as the sole markers of our memories. Writers such as Marcel Proust and Samuel Beckett have celebrated the power of involuntary memory to reclaim vanished images of the past—'breaking the habit' of linear time to capture a more ideal reality. But Mauthner rejects this poetic notion. For him, every act of remembering is inherently distorted: memory confuses identity with mere similarity and does so imperfectly. This fundamental error in memory is not a flaw to be corrected but the very condition that makes thought and language possible. Without our capacity to misremember—to confuse one echo of experience with another—and without our power to forget and edit our recollections, we would lack the raw material for concepts and words. Memory, in its fallibility, is both the engine of intellectual development and how we continue to live and think. Language and memory are two sides of the same coin. Every word we utter is a testament to our imperfect recall, and every act of forgetting permits new thoughts to emerge. In recognising that language itself is our personal archive of sensory impressions—shaped by error and refined by omission—we see that our capacity for speech and for memory are fundamentally inseparable.

Is language just a metaphor? All language is born of memory's imperfect record of past sensory experience, and so every word is at best an approximation—a metaphor for reality. No utterance carries any meaning apart from its figural likeness to something felt or seen. Language links what we have experienced with what we can articulate, creating pictures of pictures of pictures, always one step removed from the original. Our words arise from the chance distortions of memory. These Zufall moments become the building blocks of our tongue, extended by metaphorical conquest until every knowable thing is named—but never fully grasped. What we recall is not the event itself but a shadow of it; our senses are transient, and all is in flux. Certainty eludes us, for man cannot move beyond the confines of memory. Memory's fallibility brings two unexpected gifts. First, it frees us from time's strictures. By recalling past events—even imprecisely—we can draw inferences and forge connections across eras, a necessary condition for thought. Second, memory offers respite from pain. By objectifying sorrowful moments through recollection—or, as Samuel Beckett's Unnamable puts it, 'I who am here, I don't know where I shall be'—we distance ourselves from immediate suffering. In making our lives the subject of thought, language becomes a kind of magic, turning agony into reflection and yielding the calm cheerfulness that few great minds achieve. Yet memory's power to liberate also hinders our ability to live fully in the now. The more we dwell on the past, the less present we become, caught between the comfort of recollection and the impossibility of unmediated experience. Because every word depends on an imperfect memory of sensation, language remains a web of metaphors—each term a homage to what once was and a barrier to what truly is. In this recognition lies both our intellectual freedom and our perpetual longing for reality unspoken.

There are no absolutes

Mautner rejects any claim to knowledge of God, nature, or even the self. There are no absolutes. He argues that truth itself is a metaphorical construct: just as humanity formed the idea of God without direct experience, so too we invented truth. What we call a law of nature is merely our mind's habit of framing inductive concepts in language. Even nature, in Mautner's view, becomes subject to human speech—nothing exists outside the shadow cast by our words. To transcend memory and the common usage of words, Mautner insists, one must free oneself from language. Yet any attempt to express that freedom through speech is self-defeating. The only route, he suggests, lies in self-destroying sentences—phrases arranged like musical measures with deliberate pauses, tones, and silences that erase their own meaning. Here the meaning is life itself, lived and experienced rather than named. Samuel Beckett's characters echo this struggle. They recognise language as the barrier that renders their task impossible. Continuously they search for words that will allow them to fall silent, to communicate without speaking, but they fail. They long instead for moments of real communion—like sharing a beer with an old friend, where conversation drifts and pauses, where the focus shifts from the words to the shared presence. In that liminal space the language tool dissolves, becoming a mere channel for closeness. In the silence between tones, one seeks the man who no longer relies on language's empty absolutes. A figure who, like the speaker in Beckett's 'The Unnamable', exists beyond words—someone close, someone known without being named. It is in that unspoken bond, free from concepts of ultimate truth or fixed meaning, that genuine connection endures. By denying absolute truths and exposing words as mere metaphors for experience, Mautner and Beckett reveal language as both our greatest tool and our deepest constraint. We yearn for a communion beyond speech—an encounter that affirms life in its raw immediacy, unfiltered by the very words that claim to capture it.

The ego is contingent. It does not exist apart from language. The notion of a stable, enduring self is no more than a myth. Each moment lives and dies with our fleeting impressions, leaving no continuous 'I' behind. We become prisoners of time, our personalities reduced to statistics that can only be reconstructed—if at all—as a retrospective hypothesis. Memory alone seems to corroborate an ongoing self, yet memory itself is notoriously untrustworthy. Though we may feel a coherent identity, any attempt to locate a 'me' within reveals only absence. The present 'I am' soon slips into 'I was', and without recollection the ego vanishes into a black void. Few dare to confront this process head-on; most either fall silent or erect a flimsy fortress of words, playing philosopher to mask the flux of becoming. As Samuel Beckett's heroes realise, when everything melts into waves and particles there remain only nameless things and thing-less names. Language hails down like ice, its frozen meanings betraying the world's rotting labels. Even if an ego could somehow be found, it would lack the means to express itself: speech is tailored for describing the external, not for observing the inner. There exists no organ for the self to survey itself, and the 'I' can never encounter a fully objective 'me'. The subjective self seeks validation only through another's testimony—yet when language fails, 'I don't speak to myself anymore'. A stranger's voice issues forth, conscious of its own falsehood, indifferent to its own emptiness. We inhabit the same tongue yet stand on opposite banks of its currents. Only through language do 'mind' and 'body' appear as separate entities; they flow as one. Our unity of life is cleaved by words into disjointed concepts. Voices in our heads echo this fracture, reminding us that every term we know was forged by the accidents of memory and metaphor. By denying any absolute, unmediated self, we see the ego as wholly contingent on the treacherous medium of language and memory. No stable 'I' precedes speech; every attempt at self-knowledge collapses into silence or contradiction. In this void, only the living flux remains—untouchable by words, yet ever demanding we listen beyond their hollow echo.

Communication between men is impossible. Language always requires at least two participants, for it is a coupling of minds—an intellectual begetting. Yet no exchange, however earnest, can guarantee shared understanding. Every word arises from individual experience and serves as a metaphorical echo of past sensations. When we speak, we do not transmit pure thought but distribute words as one might hand out banknotes—each bearer trusting but never certain of their value. What, then, is language? Nothing more than a collective agreement, a convention akin to the rules of a game. Its power lies in the number of players: the more who join, the more compelling the convention becomes. Still, it never seizes or alters reality itself. It only mirrors the historical usage that shapes each speaker's worldview. In ordinary life—a tavern's chatter, the delights of gossip, the waiter's summons—most find language wholly sufficient and never sense its limits. Only a fool—or a Beckett hero—yearns to be understood. Despite knowing their words fall short, they crave a listener, fearing isolation. They enact a ritual of dialogue, speaking in the pauses of another's utterance, each seeking a hook on which to hang personal thoughts. Even the simplest language, stripped of abstraction, cannot banish ambiguity. No reform can fix these inherent gaps; we can only approach language with scepticism, using it sparingly and with humility. However precise our diction, the exalted notion of absolute truth remains nothing more than human babble. Every spoken word reveals the impossibility of full communion. Language binds us in convention, offers only metaphoric approximations of reality, and conceals as much as it discloses. True mastery of word or world eludes us all.

The only language should be simple language. For all his doubts about the power of words, Mauthner insists that whenever we speak, we ought to choose only the most straightforward terms. He faults established philosophy and much intellectual endeavour for turning words into abstract entities—detaching them from everyday speech. Although he argues that language can never fully capture reality, Mauthner remains committed to purifying it. By stripping language of lofty abstractions, he believes we can free ourselves from 'word-superstition' (Wortaberglauben). As Mauthner warns, language loses its purpose when it ceases to address human needs and instead tries to fulfil elevated spiritual longings that lie beyond our immediate condition. Yet he recognises that even the simplest vocabulary cannot eliminate ambiguity. As Gershon Weiler observes, Mauthner's project is not a plan to remake language but an exercise in cultivating a sceptical vigilance toward it. No matter how plain our words, they remain our own creations, and the aim of the Critique is to expose that confinement. 'I preferred everyday language to a learnt definition in order to make clear how little a definition explains', he confesses. Samuel Beckett shares Mauthner's faith in simplicity as a communicative aid, but he too sees it as only a small remedy against life's fundamental unknowability. His plays and prose—whether in English or French—favours terse declarations and reject what his characters Mercier and Camier dismiss as 'the stink of artifice'. In Malone Dies, Malone rails against prettified phrases that 'pollute the whole of speech', warning that 'nothing is more real than nothing' until one guards against their seductive emptiness. Yet even Beckett's stripped-down dialogue fails to bridge the gap between speaker and meaning: words still cannot convey their speakers' true state. In his own words, 'The exalted notion of truth is human babble'. Both Mauthner and Beckett urge us toward language pared to essentials, believing that only by renouncing jargon and abstraction can we glimpse the limits of our own words. Yet they agree that, however plain our speech, it can never fully escape its built-in uncertainties. In the end, simplicity may reveal the startling fact that human language is forever an imperfect tool for expressing reality.

Master or servant

In 'Master or Servant: Language in Thomas Hobbes' Political Philosophy'[4] Aleksei Pleshkov asks the following questions: How might our use of language illuminate the boundary between natural philosophy and political philosophy? To what extent can a sovereign authority shape or control the language its subjects employ? Is it possible to differentiate the language that flourishes within a commonwealth from that which prevails in the state of nature? Thomas Hobbes denies any absolute knowledge in physics, insisting that God created nature while humans create the state—and come to know it only through language. Language guarantees political and moral truths yet can also stall the progress of civil science: reason is not innate but learnt through words, and speech can inflame vanity, pride, and mass irrationality. All terms are arbitrary and ever-shifting, so without shared meanings there can be no community. Thucydides shows how revolutions in Corcyra were conditioned by changing definitions, as factions weaponised words to fracture trust and unleash slaughter. In the state of nature, every party speaks its own terms, making civil war almost inevitable. Hobbes argues that only a sovereign can transform 'worded nature' into social order, by enforcing common definitions, punishing deviance, and giving performative force to promises, laws and oaths. The civil contract is thus also a linguistic contract: language becomes a servant when authority secures agreement on meaning, binding citizens beyond the volatility of mere sounds. Without such arbitration, the same tool that could unite us only manufactures dissent and division. 'The paradox of the social contract' turns on the fact that a civil authority both presupposes and produces the shared language that makes a binding agreement possible. On the one hand, the very act of contracting requires a common understanding of words whose meanings the sovereign alone can fix and enforce. Yet the contract is postulated as the moment when people escape the state of nature to erect that sovereign power. Hobbes treats the state of nature not as a real historical epoch but as a theoretical extreme—a pure hypothesis of 'anti-sociality' overcome only by an ideal contract. Language itself does not change at the founding of the state; rather, only within civil society can language fully realise its power to command, promise, and oblige. Thus the sovereign indeed governs language, yet that governance simply enables language's social potency, which remains latent in the natural condition. In sum, the social contract both requires and creates the very linguistic unity it presupposes. Unchecked, language rules us as a master; but under rightful authority it becomes our servant, forging the commonwealth we cannot build by words alone.

In 'Metaphor of translation: Borges and Mauthner's critique of language' [5] Silvia G. Dapias shows how Mauthner drew on a hidden lineage from medieval nominalists through Hobbes, Herder, and Vico to revive a radical critique: language is an ill-suited tool for knowing reality yet remains our essential communal worldview and social force. Words do not faithfully mirror experience but translate sensations into concepts we all agree to use. No extra-linguistic realm exists to test our claims—truth and falsity belong only to sentences, as Hobbes argued—and meaning arises solely from the shared rules of a linguistic community. The fanciful notion that any speaker can unilaterally dictate a word's sense is overturned by the social 'game' that coordinates speech: more players make its rules stronger, and violations are self-defeating. Thinking of language as a metaphor of translation reminds us that every utterance negotiates between raw experience and the collective code we call speech, binding us together even as it

[4] Pleshkov, A. (2014). Master or Servant: Language in Thomas Hobbes' Political Philosophy. SSRN Electronic Journal. doi:https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2512784.

[5] Silvia Dapía, "The Metaphor of Translation: Borges and Mauthner's Critique of Language," Variaciones Borges, Vol. 21 (2006), pp. 23–85: p. 27.

constrains what we can know. In a language game we need not look beyond its own rules for objects to correspond with every word or phrase; communication often aims less at conveying facts than at shaping another's beliefs to serve our interests. Yet when words become empty sounds—as in babbling or word superstition—we fall into the trap of assuming that every term must name something real, just as ancient peoples linked earthquakes to gods. This intellectual weakness stems from a nominalist impulse: to treat universals or abstractions as mere labels, and to deny any extra-linguistic reality by default. Johann Georg Hamann anticipated Wittgenstein in arguing that reason itself is grounded in language—logos—which privileges metaphor, symbol, and poetic expression over sterile logic. For Hamann, poetry is humanity's mother tongue, and language acts as a living bridge mediating our inner reflections, our relations with one another, and our grasp of the world or the divine. Recognising speech as a 'language game' reveals both its power to shape minds and its limits as a purely social practice.

What is a verum factum principle? Giambattista Vico argued that truth is verified only through what humans create, not through detached observation. In 'Scienza Nuova' (1725), he likened civil society to a mathematical construction: as communities evolve, so do their languages, myths, customs, and economies. Genuine knowledge of a society must therefore arise from its own shared expressions and institutions. Vico identified three recurring ages, each defined by a dominant linguistic trope: the Divine Age, where metaphor linked humans to nature; the Heroic Age, where metonymy and synecdoche supported monarchic and feudal orders; and the Human Age, where irony and rational discourse enabled popular democracy. These cycles reflect an eternal history of rise, decline and rebirth—as reason and poetic imagination alternately flourish and fade. For Vico, all philosophy must begin with the 'common sense' of ordinary people, whose poetic signs and communal prejudices give birth to civil life. By tracing truth back to human invention—'verum factum' ('the true is made')—he challenged any claim to universality divorced from culture and reminded us that our deepest insights emerge from the stories we tell and the worlds we build together. The verum factum principle teaches that only by recognising truth in our own creative acts can we restore human reason to its rightful, practical foundation.

Words are wandering. Translation offers a privileged prism on identity and belonging: languages are never possessions but borrowings, never pure but contagious, never static capital but perpetual transit. Our attachment to a mother tongue is less a tie to soil or nation than a refuge for voices that have journeyed across time and borders. Language evolves through constant borrowing, bastardisation, stratification, and contingency—each tongue a temporary harbour for words on the move. The fin-de-siècle crisis Mauthner diagnosed among Schnitzler, Wittgenstein, Kraus, and Musil only underscores that language both shapes and limits our grasp of reality. No speech is autochthonous: every word exists between human beings, and linguistic purism mistakes a static inventory for a living exchange. Instead, we should celebrate translation and the endless circulation of 'hereditary wisdom' that makes each language a waypoint in the larger odyssey of human thought. Words are forever wanderers, finding momentary rest in our mouths before they continue their unending journey.

When Humpty Dumpty declares, 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less', Lewis Carroll satirises the arrogance of those who seize language as a tool of power. The real question is not whether words can bear so many senses, but which party—speaker or listener—will dominate their meaning. Humpty Dumpty, a thinly veiled portrait of sophists who wield jargon like a weapon, shows how obfuscation silences challenge: if your audience cannot grasp your claims, they cannot question them. In the resulting word

salad, thinking itself seems optional. Humpty Dumpty is the master of meaning only if he is a master in real life. The key term, 'master', derives from Old English mægester and Latin magister—'one who exercises authority'. Humpty Dumpty's power over meaning warns that whoever claims mastery over words can claim power over reality. The linguistic master can dictate our world—until the fragile egg of arbitrary definition inevitably cracks.

Signifying nothing

In fifth-century Athens, the original sophists, once paragons of virtue, became itinerant teachers of persuasive speech, open only to those who could pay. Aristophanes' 'Clouds lampoons this shift in the mastery of rhetorics. With language only you can win any case by pitting the 'weaker argument' against justice. By swaying juries rather than appealing to truth, you triumph in court but unleash chaos at home, beating civic order alike. Sophistic training heralded Athens' turn from heroic ethics to democratic rhetoric, where mastery of logos, speech's power to shape belief, replaced any claim to objective reality. Protagoras's dictum, 'man is the measure of all things', casts nomos (convention) over nature, and the sophists deny any criterion beyond the conventions of language. They collapse knowledge into opinion, treat truth as a matter of forceful discourse, and insist that logos never refers to things-in-themselves but only to its own structures. By entrapping thought within its own arrangements of words, speech becomes both our tool and our master, binding people to the conventions they mistake for reality. When rhetoric conquers truth, language both fashions our world and holds us captive.

In 'Signifying nothing: The problem of language in Gorgias'[6] Christine Maisto reveals that in the Gorgianic tradition of radical nominalism, words are not mirrors of things but autonomous signifiers that ultimately point only to themselves. Language wields immense power—shaping our emotions, thoughts, and beliefs—yet it remains empty of the reality it purports to convey. This tautological autonomy grants language a bewitching force: it determines what we can perceive, fractures our grasp of truth, and even binds us more tightly than any external reality. Speech fills the gulf between mind and world by standing in for absent objects, enabling us to speak of the non-existent and to fashion entire realms of meaning from metaphor, analogy, and allegory. But this very opacity makes genuine communication impossible. No matter how precise our vocabulary, words remain logical abstractions disconnected from the material substances they claim to name—whether brain cells or the objects of Jonathan Swift's flying island Laputa, where speech is so corrosive that islanders display things instead of talking about them. And yet language lives in the cadence of sound and gesture—in a whispered 'I love you', a beating heart or a shared glance—reminding us that words carry affect even when their referents vanish. In the endless play of sign and counter-sign, every utterance risks missing its mark, every interpretation slips into misreading, and every claim to mastery over words invites nihilism. If language, in its self-referential dance, truly signifies nothing, then it becomes both the prison and the proof of our endless search for meaning.

Melissus of Samos, in his fifth-century BC treatise 'On Nature or On What-Is', insists that reality is a single, motionless, infinite Being. Nothing can arise from non-being, and no change or plurality occurs. If we take him seriously, this means 'nothing is' in any plural or changing

[6] Maisto, Chrisitne Marie (2014). Signifying Nothing: The Problem of Language in Gorgias, University of California, Santa Barbara

sense. If we dismiss him as parody, then even logos loses its claim to reality. For Melissus, 'what is' coincides with nature itself, while 'what is not' belongs only to human convention. This radical monism severs any necessary link between thought and the world: we can conceive the non-existent, but such speech yields no genuine knowledge. Like Gorgias's Encomium of Helen, which debates the innocence of someone who never existed, Melissus reveals that doxical truth rests on opinion, not on shared reality. Language, being tethered to private sensations and habits, cannot reliably transmit the essence of things. Even if we all learn the same words, each mind forms its own fleeting image, and those images can never coincide exactly. Words mean only by the associations we cultivate through experience, becoming rituals of speech that drift farther from any stable referent. If nature alone 'is' and everything else—including language belongs to mere convention, then our words, however fervently uttered, ultimately signify nothing outside the limits of our individual perceptions.

'On Nature or What-Is-Not' by Gorgias is responding to a well-known thesis from 'The Way of Truth' by Parmenides: 'For the same thing is for thinking and for being. It is right both to say and to think that it is what-is; For it can be, but nothing is not'. Parmenides of Elea authored a two-part poem—only the first half largely survives—distinguishing two 'ways' of inquiry. The first, the 'Way of Truth or Persuasion', insists that 'what is' must be the object of thought and language, because non-being cannot be known or spoken of. The second 'way', that 'what is not' exists or should be, is dismissed as entirely unthinkable and inexpressible. Thus Parmenides concludes that reality is a single, unchanging 'what is', and that genuine inquiry must follow this path alone. The response of Gorgias is that 'what is' is just empty linguistic expression. Gorgias's 'On Nature or What-Is-Not' advances a radical three-step argument: first, he shows that nothing can exist—anything purportedly 'Being' fails every test (it can't be Non-Being, both, temporal, eternal, one, or many) and so 'nothing exists'. Second, even if something did exist, our minds could only think of 'not-being' (since we can imagine chariots running on water or winged men), so true being would be unthinkable. Third, and finally, whatever might be thinkable could never be communicated: each sense perceives only its own object (sight sees light, hearing hears sound), and language (logos) is merely a conventional symbol, incapable of exactly reproducing any perception. From these three claims Gorgias infers that nothing exists; if it did, it could not be thought; and if it were thought, it could not be spoken. The words are not the things. Logos is the way by which we communicate. But logos is not the objects, the things that are. Language does not transmit objects, but only words. Signs are not their signifier. All words are empty signifiers or mere copies of themselves. A word signifies nothing, or nothing other than signifying itself. While language is our vehicle for communication, the only thing it communicates its language itself. The media of language is the only message. There is a natural gap between language and reality that make perfect communication impossible.

Impossible communication means that meaning is always deferred. Meaning is just a feeling, an experience not of explanation but of appearance. With language and storytelling we encounter a new artificial reality rather than an understanding of the physical reality. Language is a form of activity that involves the production of meaning. Manufacturing meaning is the 'semiotic economy' of the mass languages. Semiotic economy refers to how a limited set of simple basic elements can yield an endless array of complex 'meaningful' expressions. In languages, this is achieved through 'double articulation': a small inventory of indivisible sounds (phonemes) can be recombined into a vast vocabulary of words. For example, English relies on just forty-odd phonemes yet manages to produce hundreds of thousands of distinct words. So the development of any mass language is a process of manufacturing artificial meaning. In semiosis, or sign process, every sign stands in place of something else, and the world unfolds

through these signs. Familiar objects become entries in our perceptual grammar, for language arises before speech and fashions reality in the mind. Speech gives that mental work voice, and listening materialises thought. Confronted with chaos, communication relies on shared conventions—a consensus on codes that demand reciprocity. Semiosis weaves signal and noise in context, and beyond human interpretation, reality remains unknowable. Our linguistic form of subjectivity emerges as the projection and presentation that names reality and makes it possible. 'Semiotic economy' reveals that language does not mirror some independent world but actively constructs a meaningful reality to inhabit.

Semiotic economy

Herrmann-Pillath and Nöth's 'Semiotics and Economics: The General Framework'[7] reviews two centuries of attempts to relate the study of signs to the study of exchange, and argues that despite early synergies—Leibniz on coins vs. words, Marx on commodities as 'social hieroglyphics', Jakobson on goods-as-utilities vs. messages—modern economics and semiotics have largely drifted apart. Mainstream economics treats language as 'cheap talk'(behavioural noise) or bias, while semiotics often confines itself to ideological critique or niche topics (advertising, money, consumer culture). Eastern-Bloc planners once sought to harness semiotics for centralised economic control, and Romanian scholars tried to axiomatise economics via Morrisian semiotics, but these projects remained marginal. Today, 'narrative economics', behavioural framing, neuroeconomics, and institutional theory gesture toward the symbolic dimensions of economic action but stop short of a full semiotic account, retaining faith in a rational core that transcends language. The authors call for a genuine 'semiotic turn' in economics—one in which economists recognise markets, money, institutions, and coordination as fundamentally sign-mediated, and semioticians engage with current economic models. But what rather than a semiotic turn in economics, what the humanities urgently need is an economic turn in linguistics? An approach that treats language itself as an 'economy of signs'. In this 'semiotic economy', the structural logic of scarcity, exchange, and productivity governs how meaning is generated, distributed, hoarded, and consumed. Just as prices coordinate supply and demand, linguistic economies regulate competition among signifiers in the markets of meaning. Words behave like commodities—each with a limited supply (phonemes, morphemes) and an exchange value negotiated through usage. Linguists should map how semantic 'prices' (markedness, prestige, novelty) allocate attention and shape lexicons. The institutions of language like grammars, style guides, editorial standards, and serialisation protocols function like financial regulators. They stabilise the 'currency' of language and define what constitutes valid sign-transactions. An economic turn in linguistics will study how these institutions emerge, how they constrain innovation, and how they broker the collective trust necessary for communication. Just as payment networks and supply chains facilitate the movement of goods, communicative infrastructures—from printing presses to social media platforms—mediate the flows and bottlenecks of signs. A semiotic economy perspective analyses where linguistic 'traffic jams' occur (jargon, misinformation) and how technological or social interventions can unclog them. Risk, speculation, and value also affect the linguistic economy. Languages evolve through metaphor, pun, and novelty—forms of 'speculation' on semantic possibilities. Like financial markets, linguistic communities hedge their bets on new

[7] Carsten Herrmann-Pillath and Winfried Nöth (2023). Presentation: Semiotics and Economics, the General Framework. RSSI/RSSI. Recherches sémiotiques. Semiotic inquiry, 40(2-3), pp.19–32. doi:https://doi.org/10.7202/1098859ar.

expressions, sometimes seeing high 'returns' in clarity or innovation, sometimes suffering 'losses' in misunderstanding or obsolescence. The linguistic obsolescence can be result of the same forces that bring 'planned obsolescence' in economy. The 'economic turn in linguistics' means recognising that language is itself a market of signs—and by mastering economic concepts of exchange and institution—can we fully illuminate the joint processes by which meaning and value co–produce our social world.

In the economy of semiosis, the main question is: What is the role of novelty, risk, speculation, and obsolescence in language? Just as manufacturers design products with built-in expiry dates to shorten replacement cycles and drive repeat sales, linguistic communities too can manufacture obsolescence—deliberately or inadvertently—through cycles of novelty and jargon. In economic terms, planned obsolescence relies on an information asymmetry: producers know that a gadget is engineered to fail or fall out of fashion, while consumers trust its durability. Similarly, speakers and writers often introduce fresh metaphors, buzzwords, or technical terms that carry high 'speculative' appeal—promising clarity, exclusivity, or innovation—but that may quickly lose value as contexts shift or fashions change. Both phenomena emerge from the same underlying forces of competition and market control. In an oligopolistic market, firms can count on brand loyalty to secure repeat business; in elite or technical discourse, communities of practice tacitly reinforce in-group terminology, making older terms feel 'outdated' or 'inefficient', and driving users toward the latest expressions. When competition intensifies—whether between carmakers vying on durability or between professional communities debating precise vocabulary—product lifespans lengthen, and language stabilises. But under conditions of planned scarcity—of parts or of shared meaning—both machines and words age prematurely. Thus, understanding language evolution as a parallel to economic obsolescence highlights how 'speculation' on semantic possibilities can yield both high returns in expressiveness and steep losses in comprehensibility. Just as consumers may resent a phone that abruptly quits working, users may recoil at jargon that suddenly loses purchase. In both markets—of goods and of signs—the deliberate shortening of useful life serves the interests of producers (and coiners of terms), but at the cost of eroding trust, inflating transaction costs, and fuelling cycles of perpetual replacement. It seems like the push for novelty, risk and speculation can bring planned obsolescence and shorten the life cycle of meaning in language.

If words and language are not signifying anything, then how men can describe themselves and create identity and symbolic space or world to live in? Although no word ever 'captures' reality in a pure, one-to-one fashion—because every sign is a selective slice of experience rather than the thing itself—language nonetheless provides the very scaffolding in which human selves and worlds are built. When we learn a language, we inherit a system of terms and categories that carve up our sensory and social experience into meaningful parcels: 'tree', 'justice', 'friend', 'war', and so on. These parcels are not empty—they each carry a constellation of associations, emotions, norms, and expectations that have been gathered over centuries of use. In this way, language does not 'signify nothing;' it signposts whole constellations of shared human experience. Your given name and family name are not arbitrary pin-numbers. They link you to a lineage, a culture, perhaps a religion. When people address you by name, they are invoking that network of relationships and meanings. When you describe yourself, you are choosing one or more nodes in that linguistic network to anchor your sense of who you are. Each label brings with it a set of cultural scripts, rights, duties, and possible narratives. We make sense of our lives by telling stories to ourselves and to others: 'I grew up in a small town, always dreaming of city lights'. Even if none of these sentences exactly 'captures' reality, the

very act of weaving them together constructs a 'symbolic world' in which you have agency, purpose, and continuity. The words function like pieces of a mosaic; taken together, they paint a coherent—if imperfect—self-portrait. Institutions—from money to marriage to the nation—exist only as shared linguistic constructs: The word dollar is 'worth' anything only because we collectively treat it as a sign of purchasing power.

In each case, language creates a 'symbolic space' governed by rules we agree to follow. These spaces are every bit as real—economically, legally, emotionally—as the physical world. Philosopher J.L. Austin introduced the idea of 'speech acts'—utterances that do not merely describe but perform an action: 'I now pronounce you'. In performing these verbal rituals, we create new social realities instantly. Our 'symbolic world' is not just a passive mirror of the physical; through language we can conjure institutions, relationships, and obligations into existence. Because every sign is provisional and context-bound, individuals and communities can—and must—continually renegotiate meanings. Activists reclaim derogatory slurs; poets invent new metaphors; tech pioneers brand new digital terms; propagandists try to rewrite history. In each case, language—and with it, identity, and symbolic space—is reshaped from the ground up. Words may never 'capture' the ineffable totality of a person or a thing, but they structure the very realm in which we think, feel, and act. By selecting certain terms and weaving them into narratives, we locate ourselves within overlapping networks of meaning—familial, cultural, professional, political. Through collective agreement, these networks become fragile but real 'worlds' in which laws, roles, and values hold sway. And by the performative force of speech acts, we can continually renew or transform those worlds—redefining who we are and the symbolic spaces in which we live.

The ends of men

In 'How language shapes thought'[8] Laura Boroditsky research how language and the ways we use it shape both national identity and individual character, even rewiring our brains. Learning a new tongue, signing with our hands, changing writing direction, or shifting between handwriting, keyboard typing and touchscreen input all reorganise neural pathways—and with them the very patterns of thought, reasoning, and speech. Our brain's hardware determines how information is stored and retrieved, guiding the software of our ideas and concepts. Altering these practices can disrupt mutual understanding and quietly erode assumptions about freedom and accountability. By introducing new linguistic habits or media conventions, one can chip away at a culture's identity and foster acceptance of norms—servitude, hopelessness—that once felt alien. To undermine a society need only be to subvert its language, turning serious discourse into hollow slogans and simplistic labels. If language carves the structures of our brain, then control over words becomes control over thought itself. So, at the end Mauthner had a point. Thinking is speaking. Changing language could change the brain itself.

In 'White Mythologies' Jacques Derrida shows that metaphysics relies entirely on allegory, metaphor, and analogy, making its practitioners inadvertent poets who weave 'white mythology' from the sensuous images that underlie every abstract idea. He argues that metaphysicians, who believe they escape appearances, remain bound to them by the very figures they deploy—brief, economical formulas that endlessly circulate in dense discourse. This 'fatal materialism' of vocabulary both erases what makes language vivid and wears out its own effigy, yet philosophers persist in treating their culturally specific fables as universal reason. Derrida

[8] Boroditsky L. (2011). How language shapes thought. Scientific American, 304(2), 62–65. https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0211-62

challenges the monopoly of Western thought by asking why other mythologies should not stand alongside white mythology in our universities and public debates. He shows that words gain power through the absence of their referents—enabling us to speak of the non-existent and to shape audiences via rhetoric's figures and schemes. Gorgias, in the 'Encomium of Helen', calls speech 'a powerful master', and his notion of logos as tyrant anticipates modern studies of persuasion. Every act of meaning-making, whether promise or insult, relies on this play of presence and absence, of sound or rhythm over any fixed truth. By uncovering metaphysics as one mythology among many, Derrida insists that no interpretation or tradition can claim final authority. White mythologies unmask the cultural fables we mistake for reason, revealing that philosophy itself remains a house of poetic echoes. Recognising metaphysics as 'white mythology' frees us to embrace a plurivocal landscape of mythic reason.

The search for new mythologies follows the cycle of paradigm breakthroughs and the dynamics of ideological revolutions observed by Thomas Kuhn in 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions'. Perception in science is never theory-neutral. As Kuhn said, 'we see the world in terms of our theories', and what any of us notices depend as much on what we look at as on our prior conceptual experience. In this light, 'the answers you get depend upon the questions you ask', for every inquiry is framed by the assumptions we carry. True innovation, Kuhn argues, requires breaking with established modes of thought. All significant discoveries in science are breaks with old paradigms of thinking and speaking in academia. Those capable of such leaps are often newcomers—'very young men or very new to the field'—who, unencumbered by orthodox practice, recognise that the old rules no longer define a playable game and are free to envision a new one. Yet novelty never arrives smoothly. Every important idea in science 'sounds strange at first', and the birth of a new paradigm is met with resistance from a community convinced that 'normal science . . . knows what the world is like'. Against this backdrop of expectation, genuine novelty emerges only with difficulty, manifesting 'against a background provided by expectation', and the transition between paradigms cannot be bridged step by step. Instead, like a gestalt switch, it must occur all at once—or not at all. Far from being an impartial arbiter, science is conditioned by its own language and tradition. The conviction that 'science was conditioned by history, society, and the prejudices of scientists' helps explain why 'normal science . . . often suppresses fundamental novelties', for they threaten its basic commitments. In sum, Kuhn reminds us that our most transformative discoveries come not from incremental refinement but from radical shifts that overturn our inherited frameworks, that our very perception of reality depends on the lenses we wear, and that true scientific progress requires the courage to step beyond the familiar—even when the world insists that nothing must inevitably be accomplished. Scientific revolutions arise when entrenched theories no longer suffice, when fresh perspectives—often from those least invested in the status quo—forge new paradigms in a single decisive leap. Our vision of reality is shaped by the concepts we hold, and every act of discovery depends on the questions we dare to pose. The logic of scientific revolution is the destruction of the ruling linguistic paradigm. Novelty ideas must shatter the inertia of expectation and the biases of the community until a gestalt shift redefines the rules. Thomas Kuhn's analysis teaches that progress demands both an awareness of our own theoretical conditioning and the boldness to break with linguistic conventions that no longer serve. The only problem is that this constant destruction of the ruling ideological systems runs out linguistic vitality and the level of trust. The logic of linguistic revolutions is that in the end devours its children. Planck's principle holds that science progresses one funeral at a time.

In his lecture[9] 'Derrida, the ends of men', Rick Roderic explores Jacques Derrida's idea of deconstruction and how text and meaning endlessly defer one another. There is nothing outside language, and every act of reading is also a misreading, an ongoing housework that never finishes. Language does not name preexisting things but stands in their absence, filling the gap between mind and reality and enabling us to speak of what does not exist. Words exist only within systems of speech that carry power and domination, and their material traces—sounds or marks—continue to disseminate meaning beyond any speaker's original intention. The deconstructive reversal reveals that the stability we seek in reference is a convenient fiction: our smartphone or our deepest thoughts are accessible only through words that always slip away from what they purport to represent. No interpretation can claim final authority; we settle instead on the reading that persuades the most people. Yet misunderstanding is not a failure but a defining feature of language. Every possibility of misreading becomes a permanent condition of our speech, and every metaphor reminds us that our world is never the thing itself but always its token. If our ends as human beings are bound up in this play of absence and interpretation, then the task is not to master language finally but to live with its limits. The ends of men emerge only within the shifting contours of our wandering words. Language can be both master and servant, but most important is its capability of self-destruction together with its host. When the language decays it is a period of moral decadence in society. Language becomes the cause of the problems that is trying to solve. The goal of philosophy and humanities then is not mastering the decaying language but getting away from it. But the tower of babble should not be abandoned or torn down only to create space for a new build. All significant breakthroughs are break -'withs' old ways of thinking, said Thomas Kuhn, but these are break with tradition and experience. The new paradigm of communication must include linguistic scepticism and critique of language. This must include respect and understanding of all the mistakes and lies from the past as part of the linguistic experience. It seems like the history of language 'is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'.

1.2. Nonsense and stupidity

Nonsense and irony

In 'Nonsense and Irony: Wittgenstein's Strategy of Self-Refutation and Kierkegaard's Concept of Indirect Communication'[10] Shlomy Mualem examines early Wittgenstein's self-refuting move as a way of transcending those linguistic boundaries, and it contrasts his notion of Unsinn ('nonsense') with Kierkegaard's doctrine of indirect communication and with Socratic irony. In the Preface to the Tractatus, Wittgenstein insists that the problem of 'nonsense' concerns delimiting the boundaries of language: nonsensical utterances lie beyond the realm of what can be meaningfully said. Yet by the book's conclusion he concedes that his own propositions are, strictly speaking, nonsensical. May be Wittgenstein is inconsistent in what he does, or he deceives us, but his propositions do have sense. What is the sense of nonsense? The answer is 'sub specie ironiae' (under the aspect of irony). The word 'irony' derives from the ancient Greek εἰρωνεία (eirōneía), first recorded in the fifth century BCE. It originally referred

[9] Roderick R. (1993). The Self Under Siege: Philosophy In The Twentieth Century, The Teaching Company

[10] Mualem, S. (2017). Nonsense and Irony: Wittgenstein's Strategy of Self-Refutation and Kierkegaard's Concept of Indirect Communication. Tópicos, Revista de Filosofía, (53), p.203. doi:https://doi.org/10.21555/top.v0i53.929.

to a stock figure in Old Comedy called the eiron. This character feigns ignorance or modesty, concealing his cleverness to outwit the boaster, or alazon. In its earliest uses, εἰρωνεία was essentially equivalent to deception. By the time of Plato's dialogues, however, it had taken on a subtler meaning: a calculated pretence that the listener is expected to detect. From there it evolved into our familiar sense of irony as saying the opposite of what one means—often for humour or emphasis. Wittgenstein shows that tautological propositions or the 'senseless' statements of his Tractatus lay out not reality itself but the scaffolding of language. These formulas say nothing about states of affairs and mark the boundary beyond which only nonsense can speak. In his later lectures on ethics, he argues that moral and religious claims are inherently nonsensical: they transcend any representable world and refuse to convey information. Their meaning lies not in description but in the ethical stir they awaken, a realm that lies beyond the reach of scientific language. From the Preface to the Tractatus to his private letters, Wittgenstein insists on the necessity of silence. He crafts a work that appears strictly logical yet conceals an ethical purpose—inviting readers to move past nonsensical propositions and recollect their own silent experiences of good, evil, and wonder. By refusing to state these truths directly, he employs a Socratic irony: the tension between the explicit logic of his words and the unspoken interior truths they gesture toward. Only by recognising the nonsensical and ironical nature of every proposition about value can the attentive reader grasp the work's deeper, unutterable meaning. 'The sense of nonsense' lies in its power to mark the limits of language and to awaken the silent domain of ethics that language can never fully enclose. In Proposition 6.54 of the Tractatus, Wittgenstein explains that his propositions are meant to be used as a ladder: once they have carried the reader upward, they must be discarded as nonsensical so that the world can be properly seen. By deliberately proclaiming his statements to be nonsense, Wittgenstein both delineates the limits of language and requires their transcendence—an act of self-negation characteristic of ironic discourse. This manoeuvre forces the reader to recognise, without direct instruction, that ethics and values lie beyond what can be said. In effect, Wittgenstein's 'nonsense' becomes a form of philosophical irony: it conceals the author's presence while guiding us past silence on one side and mere outward noise on the other, showing that true insight must be approached 'sub specie ironiae'.

Both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard insist on the primacy of subjective experience: each reader must become a personal we, crafting and deconstructing meaning alone rather than repeating ready-made slogans. Ethics and the good lie beyond the realm of facts, accessible only through a supernatural language that cannot be codified or taught directly. Ethics demands indirect communication and irony—concealing the speaker behind a mask so that the addressee, confronted with apparent nonsense, must transcend those propositions, recollect their own ethical moments and act independently. Irony's power lies in its tension between word and thought: by speaking the opposite of one's intent, the ironist spurs the listener into self-knowledge. This method of 'deceiving into truth' awakens infinite subjective freedom and challenges us to climb and discard each nonsensical rung until we glimpse reality aright. These ethical revolutions remind us that ultimate certainty belongs neither to abstract systems nor to universal truths alone but must be balanced by our personal, temporal perspectives. Right here, right now, each of us must affirm a truth that lives in time and place, shaped by our own minds. By proclaiming nonsense and wielding irony, we confront the boundary of common language and summon our singular moral insight—affirming that real understanding dawns only when words themselves fall silent.

Kierkegaard sees irony as indirect communication, where true intentions and subjective truths lie hidden beneath surface claims. Irony warns us: do not heed my words even as I speak

them. Unlike science's direct transmission of objective knowledge, irony aims at existential transformation—nudging the listener toward self-reflection and personal awakening without spelling out its message. In religion and ethics, this means guiding others to practice what they already know inwardly, using midwifery rather than didactic instruction: the speaker conceals, the addressee uncovers. Communication divides into three modes: transmission of information, establishment of community, and transformation of mind—ironically serving the highest goal of existential change. By minimising the speaker's presence, irony forces the listener to wrestle with meaning alone, 'deceiving into truth'. Socratic irony feigns ignorance to expose another's assumptions, while Talleyrand quipped that 'Speech was given to man to disguise his thoughts'. True irony speaks the opposite of its literal meaning, layering humour, paradox, or mockery over serious intent. This tension between word and thought affirms our infinite freedom: by tearing away irony's veil, we glimpse a reality beyond language's limits. Irony's negative metaphysics—pointing to something positive only through negation—reminds us that ethical and religious choices cannot be dictated but must be freely seized by everyone. Proclaiming nonsense through irony becomes a sublime art of concealment and revelation, inviting us to discover our own truths behind the mask of words.

Wittgenstein opens by reminding us that this is no mere textbook but an invitation to uncover the thoughts already dwelling within us. Its purpose is to expose the misunderstandings of our linguistic logic and to mark the boundary between what can be spoken clearly and what must be passed over in silence. To draw this limit, we must learn to think the unthinkable—knowing that beyond the frontier of expression lies only nonsense. Having believed he had solved philosophy's great problems, Wittgenstein confesses that the book's real achievement is to show how small a gain even their solutions represent. He insists that ethical propositions cannot convey the highest values: ethics stands outside the world of facts, transcendent like the aesthetic, and questions without words have no answers—and vice versa. When every scientific question is resolved, life's deeper problems remain untouched until they disappear, revealing their vanishing as the only true solution. These mystical realities make themselves manifest without needing language. Wittgenstein's method is one of silent demonstration: by restricting ourselves to what can be said, we quietly reveal the emptiness of metaphysical claims dressed up in scientific garb. In doing so, we guide others to recognise for themselves the point where language dissolves and philosophy gives way to silence. The silence of philosophy is a result of the impossibility of being propositions of ethics. Words can express nothing that is higher. Ethics is transcendental and cannot be put into words. When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question. If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it. Doubt can exist only where a question is asked. Even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain untouched.

Invasion of the words

James Joyce urged us to seize language for ourselves: to coin unfamiliar terms, assign fresh meanings and fashion a tongue all our own. Thomas Hobbes warned that powerful minds conquer words effortlessly, while weaker ones become ensnared by them. The true goal is to invade the words. Truth and falsehood belong only to speech—silence carries neither; it simply is. True wisdom springs not from books but from reading the people who write them, discerning in their pages the shifting tides of our hopes and fears. Too often, we fall into idle chatter just to fill the air, as though keeping a conversation open at an airport gate could mask the fact that the end is always near. In tough times, hard people turn to history, hoping its tales will ready us for danger or lend control over the present. Yet if we recorded every moment—walking the

streets with a 360° camera—we would lose ourselves in a loop of retelling, with no time left to live. Life demands first-hand experience; everything else is a second-order reflection. We prefer metaphors, theories, and images to the raw immediacy of people and places—and even to ourselves. We study our mirror-images, our photographs, our histories laid out like a resting ground for the past. But metaphors are lifeless; history is a cemetery. We return to them only because they hold the triggers that prompt certain reactions in us. To truly live—and to free our minds—we must invade the words, break their hold, and step beyond history's cemetery into the living moment.

Inner dialogue. Your mind buzzes with voices—echoes of parents, teachers, peers, and critics—all competing for attention. To make this chatter work for you, first ask three questions: attribution—are these voices sincerely yours or borrowed? Ego syntony—do they convey care, empathy, and genuine concern for your well-being? Fuzziness—are they clear and focused, or vague and confusing? A healthy inner dialogue becomes a constructive narrative, a story in which your life unfolds with purpose. That story's plot should meet eight criteria: 1. all-inclusive: it leaves no blind spots, accounting for every fact and feeling; 2. coherent: it links events in clear, causal chains where each moment naturally leads to the next; 3. logically compatible: it obeys sound reasoning without lapsing into contradictory or tyrannical dogmas; 4. insightful: it illuminates your own patterns, inspires awe and reveals a unique path rather than a one-size-fits-all formula; 5. aesthetic: it feels beautiful and smooth, simple yet rich, requiring the fewest assumptions for the greatest clarity; 6. explanatory: it makes sense of your choices and predicts future challenges, serving as a therapeutic guide for growth; 7. authentic: it emerges from your silent core—steady like a rock—needing no external applause or validation; 8. elastic: it reshapes itself as you learn and grow, rewiring your mind with new data while preserving its essential structure. Your life's narrative is your personal science, a theory of you that adapts, heals, and guides. By tuning your inner dialogue to meet these standards, you transform the constant racket in your head into a coherent, compassionate, and creative force.

Change your inner dialogue. Sam Vaknin. Inside your mind, a constant chorus debates every move: the voices of parents, teachers, authority figures and peers mingle with echoes of critics and abusers. Your ego becomes a crowded theatre where values clash, beliefs contradict and every assumption is under siege. You perform this inner racket behind a calm exterior, wrestling in silence over what to say, whom to please and what you stand to gain—or lose. These ever-present memories shape a core personality you believe immutable, yet healing begins by tuning that dialogue. First, tell yourself: be somebody—an individual so distinctive that you cannot be divided or forgotten. Plant legacies in your wake; craft ideas worth quoting, lives worth remembering. Even a single phrase can outlive you if spoken with conviction. By rewriting the voices in your head, you reclaim your story—changing your inner dialogue is the first step to changing your life.

Psychopaths are those who refuse to play society's game, offering an outsider's perspective on its endless manipulations and propaganda. To them, the rules are arbitrary: we can remake the game, or ignore it altogether. Yet this freedom comes at a cost. They lack the inner reservations that check normal behaviour, feel no empathy, and will push boundaries mercilessly—often at the expense of those who still believe in fair play. Their world is a shared delusion, a cruel asylum in which every move can turn dangerous. Recognising this, we can reject the voices society has planted in our minds without sliding into psychopathic detachment. True authenticity lies in embracing a form of nothingness—silencing the implants of

expectation and rediscovering our own values. This is not rebellion defined by what we oppose, but a quiet self-possession. We forge meaning through genuine connections, knowing that society's worth is measured by how we treat each other and the small communities we build. Psychopaths show us that if life is a game, it need not be played by their rules—only by those we choose to honour.

A person is an individual human being, named from the Latin persona—originally the mask of an actor's assumed role. In modern usage, personage denotes someone of rank or distinction, invested with personal power and social presence. To become truly 'a person', you must invent your own worldview—a private theory that no laboratory test can prove or falsify. Its value lies not in scientific validation but in inspiring others to create their own narratives. Unlike a hypothesis, it requires no experiments, offers no objective truth value, and belongs to a realm beyond double-blind trials. Behaviourism once tried to reduce the inner life to measurable phenomena, but every test alters its subject, traumatic protocols skew results, and no two individuals are interchangeable. Psychology is therefore more an art of storytelling than a hard science, celebrating each person's unique perspective. Your aim is to shape a healthy inner dialogue—one that fosters happiness, harmony with yourself, and lasting calm. This self-crafted narrative becomes the organising principle of your mind, generating inner order, justice, and empathy. Through its cathartic power, you purge destructive voices of guilt, fear, and hatred, replacing them with constructive purpose and genuine connection. A person is not merely a social mask but the author of their own inner story, finding identity and peace through the narrative they choose to live by.

You are nothing but a story. A powerful phrase can absolve you of the harsh voices inside your head—voices that tell you that you are unworthy, sinful, inferior, guilty, alienated or self-loathing. When you embrace that phrase, those judgments fall away. Your mind feels cleansed, organised, integrated. You forgive yourself. Through a kind of dramatic therapy—a mental crucifixion and resurrection—you atone for past mistakes, write your own Bible, and become your own god. You learn to make peace with yourself, to harness your existence, and to unite the warring voices in your skull into a single, clear voice—your own. This is the heart of narrative therapy: your self-story must be self-efficacious, an evolutionary adaptation in the linguistic jungle. Rather than drowning in endless words, you strip your narrative down to its essentials—simple, direct, tribal. When your story falters, you use psychodrama to rehearse a new script, reclaim authorship of your life, and ask: Who am I? What characters do I create? Who shapes my destiny, my values, my language? Only you can answer these questions. You devise your own solutions, rooted in your values, choices, and history. You are nothing but a story—a dream, a script, a movie. And if that is all you are, you can rewrite yourself at any moment. Trust your power to recast your narrative and become someone new. Since you are nothing but a story, take up the pen—and start writing.

'The Conference of the Birds'

In Attar of Nishapur poem 'The Conference of the Birds', the world's birds convene to choose a sovereign, for none lives among them. The hoopoe, wise guide, proposes a quest for the legendary Simorgh. Each bird embodies a human flaw that blocks enlightenment, and together they must traverse seven treacherous valleys: the Valley of Quest, where all beliefs and doubts are cast aside; Love, where reason yields to passion; Knowledge, where worldly learning proves useless; Detachment, where desire and 'reality' evaporate; Unity, where all distinctions dissolve into the Beloved's oneness; Wonderment, in which awe reveals how little we truly know; and Poverty and Annihilation, where the self-melts into eternity. Terror grips

them at the outset—many fall by drought, beasts, or panic—until only thirty remain at Simorgh's throne. There they discover the ultimate riddle: 'Simorgh' in Persian means 'thirty birds', and the divine they sought is their own reflected image, like sunlight revealed by a mirror. When the face of Simorgh is unveiled, you see that 'the birds…are but the shadows cast by that unveiling. What shadow is ever separated from its maker?' Thus we learn to look beyond surfaces and into the mystery of unity. Just as the hoopoe leads the birds into hidden valleys, language can both guide and entrap us. Planned obsolescence—or its unplanned decay—turns speech into madness, empty slogans and instruments of power that concentrate wealth and obedience. Words become command lines, reducing 'us' to automatons who follow without reflection. In 'The Conference of the Birds', the journey toward Simorgh mirrors our own pilgrimage through language's valleys—until we recognise that mastery over words must give way to the silent unity that transcends all separation. In the valleys, every word loses its fixed meaning, and only in silence does their purpose become clear. To see the Simorgh is to see oneself no longer as a speaker or listener, but as shadow and source, dissolving in the same light. Thus, the task is not to dominate language, but to pass through it—until it vanishes—and we reach what lies beyond words.

What lies before words? How do the birds unite without a conference? Paul MacLean's triune brain model describes three nested layers of our mind. The deepest, the reptilian complex, comes hardwired at birth to secure survival and gene reproduction—so primal that it even underlies our sense of beauty, whispering to each of us a private ideal that needs no public approval. It is ancient, hardwired, and indifferent to words. It acts before thinking, driven by survival, territory, and reproduction. Yet this primitive layer carries within it the silent outlines of beauty, a sense of rightness beyond articulation—a whisper that echoes the birds' initial call to seek Simorgh, a call deeper than reason. Layered above is the limbic system, the emotional brain of early mammals, where passion and fear, love and loss, carve paths in feeling. Above it lies the limbic system, a construct of early mammals that craves instant gratification, tribal belonging, and ritual; here the logic of emotions—love and hate, reward, and pain—rules, forging the networks that bind us. Crowning these is the neocortex, which only takes shape through learning after infancy. It plans for the distant future, wields abstract tools of thought and exercises restraint on our basest drives, yet offers weaker rewards than instinct or passion. Our cultures act as reprogramming scripts for these layers. Archetypes of childhood and love are inventions designed to ensure our survival, and every society negotiates four cardinal needs—sex, security, success, and sustenance—shaping destinies of triumph or failure. But we remain tribal at heart, belonging to communities of around 150 people rather than sprawling nations. Tribes will keep moving, balancing the reptilian urges, the emotional ties, and the rational visions without locking into rigid, crystalline dogmas. The triune brain model reveals how each layer rules us in turn—and how only by honouring their interplay can we rise above mere instinct to achieve true balance.

The word 'conference' means 'act of consulting together', from Latin conferens, present participle of conferre 'to bring together; deliberate, talk over', literally 'to bring together', from assimilated form of com 'together' and ferre 'to bear, carry'. Meaning 'formal meeting for consultation, discussion, instruction, exchange of opinions, etc'., is from 1580s. If the language as a nation building instrument creates larger communities, then what is the limit of this exponent growth? There must be an intrinsic kill switch hidden in the language and the culture it creates. What is the purpose of a culture? What if the culture exists to soothe the anxieties that our own language and social systems create, offering us patterns of behaviour in which we feel comfortable, respected, and valued. These anxieties arise from the large scale of human

communities created with linguistic strategies as religions and ideologies. At its heart, culture is a form of collective linguistic grooming—a shared codes of gestures, words and rituals that reassures us we belong to the right circle and are performing the right acts. In today's interconnected world, a new global codes of universal values are emerging. This codes helps explain why groups of people everywhere buy the same products and adopt the same lifestyles, even as they maintain local traditions. We can easily see these codes at work in language. You cannot believe what people say. Most people do not know why they do will want the things they do or why they say the things they say. If you stop and think. It is mostly grooming yourself, your inner voices, and others. Emotion is the energy required to learn and remember anything. That is why news are shocking. First incite anger and just add little info. The structure of speech, not the information, is the message. Speech affects not only isolated individuals, but people with their dependencies and relationships. The space between people is filled with words as promises, pledges, vows, oaths, agreements, commitments, and contracts. Language creates a linguistic kingship as a structure of a much bigger tribe. The big society is based on convention and agreement about the meaning of words. The difference from the tribe is that these words are separated from concrete men and women and can be used, copied, and send as commands in a system. The name of the sender or the institution is enough. No longer a personal authority and responsibility is needed. In big society words become like paper money, a type of negotiable promissory note that is payable to the bearer on demand. To access the meaning of a linguistic 'imprint' within a particular culture, you must learn the code for that word. By revealing these mechanisms, you can map the cultural unconscious—how entire groups in societies think, behave, and speak in predictable patterns. Culture, then, is both the lens through which we see the world and the script by which we live our lives. The purpose of a culture is to unite us through shared words, codes, and rituals, transforming individual anxieties into collective belonging. How we think is the actual process of the creating of the idea of 'we' as first-person plural pronoun. This abstract meaning of 'we' is outside the clan where everybody personally knows the others. If you want to join, it must think and speak the same. You must follow how ow we behave and speak as a group in predictable patterns. Society usually tells you to do something with your life. To 'do something with your life' has come to mean shedding your true self and molding yourself into the image society demands. Including meeting expectations, adopting its values, and playing by its reward system. Doing the right thing includes speaking in predictable patterns. Behaving and acting is also important but difficult to observe and control.

The battle for your words

The early meaning of the word 'individual' from 15c. is 'one and indivisible, inseparable' with reference to the Trinity, from Latin individuus 'indivisible'. Individuation, in the context of psychology, refers to the process of integrating the psyche to form a unified self. It is a journey of becoming a unique individual, distinct from others, including the language and thinking. This is the greatest danger of the society, and any language is a watchdog against individuation. The path to individuation is not deconstruction of societal language but invading the ready-made words for your own purpose. Every society thrives on consensus and creates official language with rules as an obstacle to dissent. Language of society is a bondage for the individual. Language may be our home but also can be your jail. Every member speaking the language must be inseparable from the abstract linguistic tribe called society, nation, ethnos, people etc. Our social identity is based on a collective verdict issued by parents, peers, teachers, and distant onlookers alike. Each voice invading your inner dialogue to channel you toward conformity. Speaking publicly creates your persona in society and can be easily faked for the

difference from behaviour. Speaking is the main part of our social behaviour. Even a small circle can impose its will, and media amplifies the game of relative positioning—measuring your worth against others in a way that fuels anxiety, depression, and the spiral of silence. This pressure to conform, or 'egosyntonic', collides with the promise of 'egodystonic', trapping you in a cycle where failure is built into the very language that spurs you on. Your own dreams, compulsions, desires conflict with the ideal self-image of your social persona. Every unattainable bar is set by external voices, so you keep striving, working, contributing at the cost of your own authenticity. To truly do something with your life, you must silence the chorus of borrowed expectations and chart your own course. Finding your own voice means finding or creating your own meaning and even own language. But what comes next? Is it possible to live outside the societal codes? To reshape your own world, one must build on simple, universal values like safety, health, and security. Words should have people behind them. People need to stand by their word. Respect for the words of authority must be based on experience, not on faceless institutions or celebrity power. Speech should be used to unite rather than radicalise, to speak truth instead of chasing headlines. People live adrift in a virtual fog of endless connections without content or structure, fed hollow promises that stoke paranoia and perpetual anxiety. Abstract speech thrives on this chaos, engineering fear so that only the most paranoid feel safe. As machines grow smarter, human operators grow duller—lost amid bubbles of empty interaction. Only by restoring real bonds, nurturing communal values, and resisting the noise of engineered dissent can we chart what comes next. What comes next is a return to human values and personal responsibility—a world where connection means human care, not just cold data.

The battle for your mind takes place on linguistic fields. The battle of words begins with the realisation that most conflicts arise from failed communication—yet today communication itself is the problem. We live in the first over-communicated society, where each year we flood the airwaves with more messages and understand less. This is a failure of language before everything else. A new paradigm of communication is needed. Mass media, marketing and advertising are the perfect testing ground for communication theories. If a strategy works in ads, it will work in politics, religion, or any field that requires moving masses. But this saturation breeds oversimplified slogans, narrow targets, endless segmentation, and nonstop repetition. In such a world, only the paranoid survives. We mistakenly treat words as if they carried fixed, intrinsic meanings. Words are empty containers—triggers for the opinions, wishes and beliefs we already harbour. To influence thought, you must pick the precise terms that awaken the buried ideas you need. Alfred Korzybski taught that a sane mind fits opinions to facts, while the insane force facts to fit opinions. Twisting reality to suit our views is far easier than changing our preconceptions. Emotions, too, originate within; external signals merely unleash feelings we already possess. Mastering communication means learning how to spark and steer those inner currents. Always seek facts to test your beliefs, consult experts who reinforce sound reasoning, and remember that language is the mind’s currency. We think in words—ready-made tools that we must learn and then wield deliberately. True speech rejects the chaos of empty noise and reclaims language as a precision instrument—aligning facts to minds through carefully chosen words. External stimuli just trigger emotions, but they are created inside you. Being human is to know how to learn how to trigger emotion and to control them. The choice of words can influence the thinking process itself. To think conceptually, you manipulate words. Language is the currency of the mind.

Every new slogan seeks to occupy the empty spaces in our consciousness, racing to stake its claim on that open hole before any rival can name it. A slogan is nothing more than a name,

a logo, or an image; the meaning itself is merely incidental. Once the void is filled, language nurture a dependence, inventing needs that feel essential. But as every corner of the mind becomes claimed, it must expand the universe of words and manufacture new cavities to fill. Traditional linguistics has lost its creative edge—it now serves mostly to maintain established ideas. Critique of language, by contrast, builds them from scratch. It feels authentic, reaches people more deeply and introduce fresh meanings. To make ideas catch on, we must tap into social currency—sharing content that boosts our own standing or creates insider status. Language criticism is not an antilanguage, but revitalisation. Successful stories hide their true agenda in broader narratives, like Trojan horses, so that they spread organically and carry value. Smart communicators embed triggers—little cues that bring a message to mind repeatedly—fuel emotional engagement and leave behind a behavioural residue that sticks long after the first encounter. By weaving these elements together—first owning a mental niche, then sustaining it through authentic storytelling and social dynamics—we win not just fleeting attention but a permanent foothold in people's thoughts. The battle for our mind is won not through louder ads but by claiming mental territory, nurturing genuine narratives, and harnessing the social forces that embed ideas in our collective consciousness.

There are multiple realities that compete for truth and legitimacy. Everyday experiences push us to sort life into broad categories that carry shared meanings for ourselves and others. But our conversations do more than exchange news—they perform 'reality maintenance', reinforcing a communal version of the world through linguistic grooming. What might sound like pointless small talk is really a ritual of mutual validation, ensuring that everyone's inner map of reality stays coordinated and consent to what counts as true remains intact. Free language can easily start truth deconstruction, so it is carefully gated. True rebellion starts with language criticism, and every war starts with propaganda. Scientific revolutions create new language of abstract terminology and political movements create ideologically charged newspeak. That is why this reality maintenance is crucial in moments of generational shift or social upheaval, when competing worldviews collide, and the symbolic universe can no longer self-legitimate. Elites deploy theology, science, and ideology to stabilise the prevailing order, but when contradictory ideas become widespread, the old reality unravels, and new realities vie for acceptance. Revolutions begin not with weapons but with the breakdown of shared meaning. Gone is the notion of a single objective truth waiting to be discovered. Instead, our world is shaped by multiple, overlapping realities—each sustained by its own language, rituals, and institutions—and each striving for the authority to define what we must believe. When competing realities vie for legitimacy, our only choice is to recognise their constructed nature—and decide for ourselves which truths we will uphold.

'Language' does not exist!

In the 'The linguistic turn'(1967) Richard Rorty ushered the idea that language does not simply mirror an external world but actively constructs the realities we inhabit. From this perspective, there can be many competing, even contradictory, 'worlds' or inner experiences, each maintained through its distinctive discourse. A discourse, in turn, sets the social boundaries that determine which statements may be made about any topic and shapes the practices by which individuals imbue reality with shared meaning. Symbolic interactionism builds on this insight by examining how people use common symbols and language in both intra- and interpersonal communication to forge collective understandings. In daily encounters, we constantly negotiate and reaffirm the meanings that guide our actions, and society emerges not as an abstract entity but as the sum of these ongoing interactions. In this view society is something ephemeral that

is only emerging if a critical mass of members plays the language game. Words become powerful symbolic tools that influence behaviour precisely because we all agree—often unconsciously—to use them in the same way within our social context. The linguistic turn teaches us that by reshaping our discourse and symbols, we reshape the very realities we live by. The crucial question in the genealogy of this ephemeral 'we' is who controls the language and specifically the meaning of the words?

In the 'Mind, Self and Society'(1931) George Herbert Mead defines the mind as our capacity to use symbols and through language and thought to assign meaning to the world. The self is our ability to reflect on how others perceive us, and society is the virtual space where these symbolic interactions occur. Mead's framework rests on three core assumptions: that meaning emerges through communication, that our self-concept motivates our actions, and that a unique, reciprocal relationship binds individuals and their society. He offers three premises: we act toward things based on the meanings we give them; those meanings arise from our interactions with others; and we continually reinterpret and adjust them as we engage with the world. Thinking itself is an 'inner conversation' or 'minding', a dialogue born only after we have mastered symbolic interaction. By taking another's role, we see through their eyes and enrich our shared social reality. But a fourth premise might be added: we are driven by an innate desire for psychological rewards from social engagement, prompting us to shape realities filtered through collective exchange. After this work, we realise our world has shifted—our shared meanings remade by the very conversations that sustain them. But what is society—this aggregate of our interactions—and what is language? Are they a group voice, a chorus of inner selves, or simply an empty code until individuals breathe life into it? Societies and languages have no independent existence; they are conceptual constructs—collections of individuals bound by common practices, rules, and authorities. Social reality is complex but fleeting sum of all interactions. Even wars exist only as ideas; the only concrete reality is the many lives affected. 'Mind, Self and Society' teaches that our inner voices, language, and social structures co-create each other—revealing that the realities we live by are nothing more and nothing less than the stories we continually tell together. It is up to us to tell a different stories if we dare.

In a 1987 interview, Margaret Thatcher argued that appeals to 'society' merely mask individual responsibility: 'There is no such thing. There are individual men and women and there are families, and no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first'. Decades later, Boris Johnson[11] stressed that 'there really is such a thing as society' when he thanked pharmacists, NHS workers and volunteers, urging everyone, 'One thing I think the coronavirus crisis has already proved is that there really is such a thing as society'. He assumed a collective existence in the face of clear and present danger—the very idea Thatcher had dismissed. This clash raises a deeper question: does society have an objective reality of its own? Émile Durkheim answered with a resolute yes. He described society as a sui generis phenomenon, irreducible to the individuals who compose it. Through shared beliefs, rituals and communications, individual consciences fuse into a synthetic whole—a constructed, 'artificial' reality that exerts its own pressures and possibilities, shaping behaviour in ways no single person could. Society may not be tangible like a person or a family, but it is an artificial reality born of our shared language. The shared convention about the meaning of the words has the power to shape us into society and to create the feeling of 'we'. This collective consciousness

[11] PA Media (2020). There is such a thing as society, says Boris Johnson from bunker. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/mar/29/20000-nhs-staff-return-to-service-johnson-says-from-coronavirus-isolation.

can feel as real as any law of nature. So may society and language does not exist, but 'we' are using them well.

In his article 'Why there is no such thing as society should not be regarded with moral revulsion?'[12] Hugh McLahlan is making an interesting linguistic observation among other topics. Words are not things. When it comes to language and words we often judge emotionally. Saying that there is no such thing as society does not cancel society but incites moral reaction. This is the main effect of language. Instead of making things with words it is to provoke emotions. Like making people angry with words. Society is a shared belief that is protected fiercely. A tribe or even big family clan exists not only as individual members but as a wholeness of personally connected people. But British society is just a provisionality. Of course, society does not exist, but also language, nation, public, people, and humanity. They are all conventions. Just words with fleeting meaning that is working for a certain time and place. Society lives only in the shared agreements of its members—agreements about the meaning of words, symbols, and roles. It exists not for its own sake but to serve individuals, helping each person find themselves rather than lose themselves. In practice, society is a linguistic creation: a collective name, a set of uniforms and behaviours, a conspicuous performance of a shared story that is, at root, pure fiction. This fiction takes the form of a social contract signed by countless minds, a system not of perfect harmony but of controlled dissent. We speak our common interests into being, then enforce them with commands and conventions. Human groups naturally cap out at around 150 individuals—the band whose voices can all be heard—beyond which our public sphere fragments. Mass media then scales this acoustic boundary, forging abstract consent among audiences who never meet. Etymologically, society comes from the Latin 'socius'—companion or ally—and originally meant fellowship or alliance. By the mid-16th century, it had come to denote any association united by purpose, and by the 17th, a community aware of living together in order. The term even evolved to signify the 'cultivated' circles of fashion by the 19th century. Yet through every shift, society remains a construct of language, an alliance of companions bound not by blood or substance but by the stories they tell and retell. Because society exists only in our shared words and agreements, when those words dissolve, society itself vanishes—proving that in reality, 'society does not exist'.

Public opinion does not exist. When we speak, we inevitably offer an opinion—so wrote Plato—yet three assumptions underlie every exchange: that anyone can hold an opinion, that all opinions carry equal weight, and that posing a question signals there is no shared sense of which questions truly matter. In reality, 'public opinion' is always mobilised by crisis or conflict, forcing us to choose among the voices deemed authoritative in our own circles. We adopt the views of the powerful within our group, repeat slogans until they feel self-evident, and conform to the endless chorus of agreement. This manufactured unity—'the power of many'—masks the fact that no opinion is truly neutral; the dominant ideas always reflect the interests of those who shape the conversation. Society claims to rest on consent, yet consent itself is a narrative we collectively tell, not an objective truth. Opinion, at its root, is conjecture—a belief we cherish and defend, born of trust or desire rather than evidence. When we speak of 'public opinion', we invoke a single, coherent voice that in fact never exists apart from the turbulent mix of

[12] McLachlan, H. (2020). Why ‘there’s no such thing as society’ should not be regarded with moral revulsion. [online] The Conversation. Available at: https://theconversation.com/why-theres-no-such-thing-as-society-should-not-be-regarded-with-moral-revulsion-136008.

individual judgments, repeated refrains, and power dynamics. Because what we call public opinion is really a patchwork of competing, interest-driven perspectives, 'public opinion does not exist' as a unified reality—only as the illusion we create through language and ritualised agreement.

The meaning of society? Society begins as companionship—a fellowship of allies whose bonds are forged in language and shared purpose. In the 12th century, French société and Latin societas spoke of friendly association and union, rooted in socius, 'companion'. By the 1540s, society meant any group gathered for a specific purpose; a century later, it had broadened to denote the people of a community bound by residence and mutual awareness. By the 19th century it even signified the cultivated elite whose manners and fashions set the tone for others. A company, too, grew from 'bread-fellowship', a circle of messmates sharing sustenance, to a commercial association of craftspeople and merchants by the 14th century, and later to any body of persons united for business or comfort. A tribe was at first one of the twelve divisions of ancient Israel or Rome, but from the 16th century it labeled any ethnic or social clan under a recognised head. Race entered English in the 16th century as lineage, a stock of common descent, though ironically its roots lie not in Latin radix ('root') but in later French razza. By the 18th century it denoted broad human divisions—an imprecise taxonomy that modern anthropology still debates. Stock, from the Old English stocc, began as a tree trunk but came to mean line of descent and family ancestry, the living 'stem' of kinship. Community, from Latin communitas and Old French comunité, originally signified the quality of shared fellowship. By the 14th century it had come to mean people united by locality or common interest, a public commons of living ties and mutual obligations. Across centuries these terms have traced the arc of human connection: from intimate alliances around bread and kin to sprawling assemblies shaped by law, commerce, and culture. Each word—from society and company to tribe, race, stock, and community—reveals a facet of how we bind ourselves together in stories we call our common life. The meaning of society is never fixed; it survives only in the living agreements we renew with every act of companionship and shared purpose.

Language like society is also a synthetic reality. Emile Durkheim taught us that social facts—those ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist beyond any one individual—shape our lives as powerfully as physical laws. Society, he argued, is the ultimate social fact, a collective force that moulds behaviour and thought. Language, too, functions as a synthetic reality: it emerges from countless interactions, holds its own causal weight, and governs what we can conceive and express. As David Graeber reminds us, both society and language are human inventions, capable of being reshaped. From the seventeenth century Michel de Montaigne’s insistence that we must 'interpret interpretation' to Nietzsche’s declaration that 'there are no facts, only interpretations', thinkers have exposed the constructed nature of our world. In 1922 Walter Lippmann warned that the 'real environment' is too vast and fleeting for direct grasp, so each of us lives within a 'pseudo-environment'—a personal fiction, assembled from cultural narratives and social conventions. This social constructivism shows that much of what we take for reality is a collective creation: shared meanings and structures that guide our perceptions and actions. We do not simply absorb language; we reproduce it, invest it with value, and so make it real. If language is a synthetic reality as malleable as society itself, then by understanding its constructed roots we unlock the power to reconstruct our shared world.

Open society and its language

In his 'Open Society' 1932 Henri Bergson coined the term 'open society' to describe a dynamic system grounded in universalism, standing in stark contrast to the closed societies

bound by fixed laws—linguistic, moral, religious, or legal. But can it be an open language in an allegedly open society? Is it possible for the language to be open and to sustain a stable society? Even when civilisations vanish, the instincts that define inclusion and exclusion endure. Universalism, as a meta-ethical stance is seen in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which sets moral standards for all humanity. But is there a universal language that can explain and support these moral standards? Max Weber and later Talcott Parsons insisted that social phenomena must be traced back to the intentions of individuals—a doctrine known as methodological individualism, which underlies much social science. When social 'laws' prescribe how people ought to think, reason is abused in the service of power. Much of the social 'facts' are opinions and conventions, accessible only through language and collective dialogue, never as direct observations. Friedrich Hayek, in 'The Counter-Revolution of Science', and Popper, in 'The Poverty of Historicism' and 'The Open Society and Its Enemies', both defended the rule of critical inquiry against any system claiming ultimate answers. But this desire to prevent the slide into collectivism and totalitarianism can easily result in miscommunication. Both the humanities and natural sciences share methods of causal explanation and privileging individual action can be a misleading language game. Game theory's prisoner's dilemma and Olson's logic of collective action later demonstrated that even shared interests do not guarantee cooperation—public choice requires influencers, pressure groups and the strategic formation of opinions. Throughout, the lesson holds: society, like language, is an artificial construct—an open system that thrives only when we preserve the freedom to question its assumptions, reshape its rules and protect the rights of individuals against any forced unanimity. A true open society will eventually fall to its open language. Free speech that continually questions societal conventions, empowers destructive individual thought, and resists any effort to close the circle of consent. Even the open society must control and close its language if it is to survive.

Linguistic wars are fought in the fields of academia for control over language. In the 1960s and 1970s, American theoretical linguistics saw its own civil war when Noam Chomsky's generative grammar collided with the generative semantics of his former students—Paul Postal, John Ross, George Lakoff and James McCawley, sometimes dubbed the Four Horsemen. Chomsky held that an underlying syntactic deep structure drives meaning, while the generative semanticists argued the reverse: that deep structures themselves are semantic objects shaping surface syntax. This dispute gave birth to distinct paradigms, from cognitive linguistics—where language learning hinges on memory, perception, and categorisation—to ever more abstract theories of deep and surface structure. Nearly sixty years later, we confront a new language battlefield. In our post-truth era, left and right seem to speak different tongues, locked in endless repetition of slogans. Meaning has collapsed under the weight of simplified sound bites, yet indirect and figurative speech still carries hidden signals for those tuned to context. Small, vested-interest groups now engineer linguistic change as naturally as currents carve a riverbed, and in times of conflict we learn to watch our words as carefully as our weapons. Around the globe, disputes over linguistic minority rights, over whether a speech form is a language or merely a dialect, are resolved not by phonology but by politics—'a language is a dialect with an army and navy', as Max Weinreich observed. Governments promote or suppress tongues according to power, for if speech makes us right, might makes that speech prevail. When words become weapons, we must remember that the true battleground is not syntax or semantics but the space where power and persuasion meet—and that only by reclaiming meaning can one side hope to win the linguistic war.

The pronouncement that 'language is closed'—that its meanings must be regulated, fixed, and controlled, even within so-called open societies—was met with resistance, yet also reflected a broader cultural unease. When a prominent declaration once claimed that theoretical engagement in the humanities had ended and 'theory is dead', responses revealed anything but consensus. Many acknowledged a diminishing influence and affirmed the abstraction of theoretical language and intellectual life. Far from being obsolete, theoretical discourse is seen as an enduring source of societal change. The control of reality is linguistic and the language in society is closed. Since the mid-1990s, a series of books has declared the supposed end of theory, each with titles suggesting closure or aftermath: 'Post-Theory', 'After Theory', 'Life After Theory', among others. These works vary in tone—some denounce theoretical abstraction, while others interpret 'after' as a form of maturity, not death. Most contributors agree, however, that theory deepened our understanding of culture and that any return to pre-theoretical, purely empirical methods would be both impossible and undesirable. Yet they also admit uncertainty about what theoretical inquiry now means or where it should go. This uncertainty coincides with a deeper ideological transformation. As societies embrace allegedly open values, their discursive space paradoxically narrows. What masquerades as pluralism is often the rigid policing of meaning, the closure of interpretation, and the regulation of language in the name of universality. The critique of theory becomes a symptom of this deeper drive: the desire not to question meaning but to stabilise it. Thus, the proclamation that 'language is closed' reflects the attempt to restrict the plasticity of thought and reimpose control in the face of semantic instability. Some writers have attempted to rescue or redirect theoretical language by re-engaging with questions sidelined during the era of postmodern playfulness—truth, ethics, religion, mortality. These efforts replace linguistic opacity with more direct expression, stripping away layers of jargon and reintroducing philosophical figures once deemed passé. They shift the terrain from endless textual play to moral and existential substance. But while they reorient the agenda, they rarely offer coherent new visions. They rehearse old debates under new rhetorical conditions, never quite resolving whether theory has ended, transformed, or simply returned in disguised forms.

The control of meaning in the post-theoretical age is nothing else than fear of real change in the structure of society. The supposed decline of theoretical language is just a planned obsolescence aimed in endless cycle of referral and postponed social action. Theoretical language explores the fading influence of deconstruction, endlessly reframing popular culture and mass media. Still, what emerges is not a unified alternative but a multiplicity of proposals—performatism, hypermodernity, critical modernism—that try to outlive postmodernism without fully escaping it. These paradigms are more diagnostic than generative; they describe what has been rather than invent what could be. The loss of postmodernism’s vitality is sensed less in theoretical argument than in cultural production. Sounds, videos, and texts that mimic its strategies now appear stale, their intertextual games collapsing under repetition. The exhaustion of aesthetic experimentation—sequels, remakes, referential irony—suggests not failure of execution but the end of a cultural moment. Still, no definitive break is identified. The notion that postmodernism has died, like the claim that theory has ended, is itself shaped by fatigue, nostalgia, and the longing for conceptual closure. What follows postmodernism is not liberation but regulation. After a short break language must be closed again. The rhetorical openness once championed by theory now yields to a managed discourse, where meanings are policed in the name of progress and inclusivity. The end of theory is not an intellectual event but a political symptom: an era where language, even in a so-called open society, is rendered closed. It must no longer call for action but produce endless interpretation, confirm consensus, shield

sensibility, and enforce the boundaries of expression. Thus, the cultural atmosphere is not post-theoretical, but post-critical and post-active—saturated with inherited gestures from theory but emptied of their disruptive potential. In this controlled environment, the struggle is no longer between competing theories but between the remnants of linguistic freedom and the creeping closure of meaning itself. The post-active theory became an organised stupidity.

Linguistic stupidity

The term 'stupid' derives from Latin stupere, 'to be stunned or numb', and originally designated the comic 'fall guy' of Roman mimes. By 1541 'stupid' and 'stupidity' had entered English as pejoratives alongside 'fool', 'idiot', and 'dumb', applied to those deemed incapable of learning or reason. Stupidity in speech is marked by mental sluggishness and senseless utterances, a hesitancy or muddle that betrays an impaired capacity to think or express ideas clearly. In modern usage 'stupid language' includes halting, circular, or disjointed speech. Also, an insensibility and dullness of linguistic feeling—turning language into rote phrases devoid of nuance or empathy. Another example is pointlessness and utterances that vex or exasperate because they add no value, insight, or relevance to the conversation. Stupidity in language can be mere ignorance but can be deliberate strategy, ritual, or habit. In speech, a stupid remark is not simply uninformed; it is a deliberate, maladaptive choice to ignore available information or logic. The speaker knows—consciously or not—that their words undermine understanding, yet persists, blocking any chance for adaptation or mutual comprehension. Thus, speech-based stupidity is not just the absence of knowledge but the active, self-defeating misuse of language itself. When language swells beyond everyday speech into specialised codes—task forces, overarching principles, strategic initiatives—it ceases to inform and instead becomes a shield for confusion. Words lose their referential power, and facts that contradict personal prejudices can simply be disbelieved. In political and commercial discourse, bland euphemisms, and catchy slogans masquerade as substance. A beauty ad declares a 'delicate-as-air spray' that 'shimmers youth', yet says nothing. Such manufactured gibberish only tricks the mind into passivity. Words like 'synergy', 'empowerment', 'next generation' and 'sustainability' are repeated until they become empty labels. Their proliferation mirrors a 'game of stupid', wherein lowering expectations allows one to shirk responsibility under the guise of harmless incompetence. In an intellectual wordplay the 'clever stupidity' of abstract logic is untethered from experience. Learnt phrases and ornamental metaphors may dazzle, but they often erect barriers to real understanding when affective resistance turns thought into 'pseudo-stupidity'.

As William Blake famously wrote, 'If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise', and Jung affirmed that 'stupidity is the mother of the wise'. Yet these insights praise the unexpected clarity born of simplicity, not the endless churn of meaningless verbiage. Walter B. Pitkin called stupidity 'the supreme social evil', warning that when the powerful speak in vacuous clichés, collective action is paralysed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned that stupidity is 'a more dangerous enemy of the good than evil' because it cannot be reasoned with or restrained: people simply dismiss facts that clash with their prejudices. Its real threat appears in groups, where a stupid individual can commit great wrongs yet remain blind to their own wrongdoing. Carlo Cipolla argued that the truly dangerous stupidity lies not in malice but in minds that cannot grasp their own folly, spreading harm by accident rather than design. Linguistic stupidity emerges when words are divorced from shared meaning—through jargon, euphemism, buzzwords, and cynical doubletalk. Recognising this abuse, people must champion simple, honest speech that invites understanding rather than obscures it, lest we remain dazzled by empty sound and deaf to genuine insight.

In 'Language and Stupidity'[13] James F. Welles warned that language evolved to share information and bind groups, but by carving our world into arbitrary, culture-bound categories it also narrows our experience—and, overall, breeds a collective stupidity. Words are audible symbols that impose fixed labels on the fluid continua of colour, motion, sound, and feeling, creating mental 'schemas' through which we filter reality. This categorisation speeds cognition but invites two fatal errors. First, stereotyping: we overgeneralise, treating all members of a labeled group as identical and discarding the richness of individual variation. Second, linguistic fragmentation: different tongues slice the same world into incompatible conceptual maps, fuelling misunderstanding and conflict rather than mutual enrichment. When fresh evidence clashes with our verbal schema, we instinctively defend our language-shaped beliefs—repressing or rationalising inconvenient facts—rather than update our understanding. Over time, speech proliferates in clichés and dogmas that no longer connect with reality, and 'meaning' frays into empty noise. The endless chatter of words, divorced from direct experience, becomes the very stuff of stupidity: entrenched ignorance that resists correction because it is woven into the grammar of our lives. In sum, the wealth of language carries a hidden tax: the more we talk in preset categories, the more we harden our minds against nuance and truth, marching ever closer to the 'end of meaning' and the reign of collective folly. Every human language carves up the continuous flow of experience—motion, colour, sound—into fixed categories, and these verbal divisions shape how we think, feel, and judge the world. While categorisation can streamline perception, it also breeds stereotyping, the overgeneralising impulse that treats distinct individuals or events as identical. Once we label people by skin colour, religion, or language, we too easily ignore their unique traits and lump everyone under the same mental heading. Using euphemism leads to dehumanisation of speech. Words can be weapons. Euphemisms sanitise violence and obscure meaning so thoroughly that atrocities slip by unnoticed. Language thus framed dehumanising strategies as medical procedures, making it nearly impossible to argue against a policy dressed in innocuous terms.

The use of jargon can bring ideological blindness. Technical or political jargon erects further barriers to clear thought. Whether it is 'executive privilege' and 'national security', or partisan epithets for rivals, specialised vocabulary isolates insiders and alienates dissenters. Such language directs attention only to what the ruling group deems important, while trivialising or erasing competing perspectives. Memory can act as a delusion, and language as a filter. Language also encodes our memories, but memory is fallible. We forget inconvenient facts and embellish or invent others, reinforcing our preexisting schemas. In this way, language keeps us in comfortable but misleading narratives, letting us cling to delusions rather than confront reality. Language thus not only shapes perception but also fortifies it against change, trapping us in self-deceptive routines of thought and behaviour. At its most fanciful, language spins tales of afterlives and unseen powers that no empirical test can confirm. While such myths may confer group cohesion or individual comfort, they also illustrate the arbitrary power of words to persuade us of realities that lie entirely outside sensory experience. Not only the linguistic roots of foolishness are revealed but also the foolish roots of language. From the categories we impose on nature to the euphemisms that mask brutality, language carries within

[13] James, F. and Welles (2021). Language and Stupidity. OA J Behavioural Sci Psych, [online] 2021(1), p.180053. Available at: https://academicstrive.com/OAJBSP/OAJBSP180053.pdf [Accessed 19 May 2025].

it the seeds of our own stupidity. The evolutionary biologist David Krakauer[14] claims that stupidity is not simply the opposite of intelligence. 'Stupidity is using a rule where adding more data doesn't improve your chances of getting a problem right, in fact, it makes it more likely you'll get it wrong'. Intelligence, on the other hand, is using a rule that allows you to solve complex problems with simple, elegant solutions. 'Stupidity is a very interesting class of phenomena in human history, and it has to do with rule systems that have made it harder for us to arrive at the truth', said Krakauer. 'It's an interesting fact that, whilst there are numerous individuals who study intelligence—there are whole departments that are interested in it—if you were to ask yourself what's the greatest problem facing the world today, I would say it would be stupidity. So, we should have professors of stupidity—it would just be embarrassing to be called the stupid professor'.

After digimodernism

Today artificial intelligence is the biggest topic for research, but collective stupidity also waits to be researched. The digital technologies and large language models (LLM) can be used to track and expose linguistic stupidity. In 'Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture' (2009) Alan Kirby discusses the clash between technologies of reason and our mostly irrational culture. Kirby, in his widely read essay 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond' [15] (2006), argues that we have moved into what he calls 'pseudo-modernism'—a cultural logic defined not by grand theories but by individual intervention (especially via the Internet). In 1999, The Stuckist movement and its 'Remodernism' manifesto positioned themselves as 'anti-anti-art', championing figurative painting, beauty, and authenticity against what they saw as postmodernism's vacuous self-involvement. Declaring postmodernism 'lost in the cul-de-sac of idiocy[16]', they charged that its only real innovation lay in marketing hype and predicted it would end up 'in the dustbin of history'. The linguistic stupidity of postmodernism is in its claim to be the apex of history – whilst simultaneously denying the values that make the same history worth having in the first place. It claims to address significant issues but only conducts a convoluted dialogue with itself. Both modernism and postmodernism have fetishised the author—yet in today's culture we have turned that fixation onto the reader until reader and author collapse into one another in social media. Postmodernism once offered a new paradigm of authority and knowledge shaped by emerging technologies and social forces, inviting us to see ourselves as co-authors. Now we have passed beyond what Kirby calls 'pseudo-modernism', where cultural works exist only through our physical intervention: reality TV depends on our votes and clicks, online platforms live off our likes, and every viewer becomes a 'participating viewer' whose mechanical tapping creates the content itself. This pseudo-modernism is amnesiac and shallow. Texts vanish in an instant, leaving no sense of history or future, no enduring cultural value. We remix endlessly. We surf, click and blink through a desert of signs, mistaking habit for control and remote-control for genuine participation. There are no readers now, only viewers, no authors, only avatars in a digital game. Identity shrinks to the insignia of power—your car, your status symbol—while intellectual criticism is co-opted or silenced by consumer fanaticism. In this landscape of technological feudalism, we watch beheadings on our smartphones, trapped in an

[14] Pomeroy, R. (2023). What Is Stupidity? [online] RealClearScience. Available at: https://www.realclearscience.com/blog/2019/03/02/what_is_stupidity.html [Accessed 20 May 2025].
[15] Kirby, A. (2006). The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond. Philosophy Now, [online] 58, pp.34–37. Available at: https://philpapers.org/rec/KIRTDO-2.
[16] Philosophynow.org. (2015). Philosophy Now. [online] Available at: https://philosophynow.org/issues/108/The_Afterlives_of_Modernism.

anxious trance where action equals existence. We have slain the thinking individual, leaving behind only the act of clicking. The death of postmodernism gives way to a hollow digimodernism.

In 'Digimodernism[17]' (2009) Alan Kirby coined this disconcerting new -ism to point more to a world in which innovative words are invented instead of any effort to change things. It is just a linguistic imitation of adaptation to preserve the status quo. The main question is: 'Is it time for a new –ism?' Kirby proposed that postmodernism has brought us to the end of logic and to the collapse of language as a coherent system of order. Its sceptical readings of culture expose life's absurdities and deny any belief in absolute truth or objective reality. In the postmodern era, no single meaning holds sway, every term fractures into contradictory senses. This anti-essentialist, anti-foundational stance declares, 'I don't care—whatever works', privileging pragmatic play over any firm ground. Kirby suggests that what follows is not another rigid theory but escapism: a surrender to complete freedom of thought, a form of philosophical liberalism that abandons the notion of a linear 'logical history' altogether. In this new climate, we drift beyond postmodern scepticism into an ethos that prizes individual imagination over communal consensus, forsaking foundational narratives for the liberty to invent our own. If postmodernism has dissolved our certainties, then perhaps it is indeed time for an 'escapism'—a new –ism that liberates us from the ruins of logic and invites us to create our own ever-shifting worlds.

Postmodernism's era has arguably ended not with a single inexorable blow but through a thousand small betrayals: its aesthetic tropes, once fresh and subversive, became mass-marketed formulas for children's entertainment; digital pioneers outflanked its experimental provocations; its manifestos were outmoded by digital reality. Whether in computer-animation breakthroughs, AI-written news, deep fake images, and videos, we see postmodernism transformed from an ongoing project into an historical artefact. Although its playful allusions and ironic detachment still colour our culture, they now serve as background noise to new, digitally driven forms of expression. The day will come when postmodernism is remembered rather than lived—and perhaps that day is already upon us. But what -ism comes after so called digimodernism? Maybe it is not a modern one, but traditional? Modernism refers to a broad movement characterised by a conscious rejection of traditional forms and a focus on experimentation and innovation. Traditionalism is the opposite of any intellectual movement emphasising modernising ideas, originality, and novelty. If postmodernism is associated with imitation, mimicry, remix, plagiarism, emulation, reproduction, and simulation this is something opposite to modernism or a 'pseudo-modernism'. So digimodernism can be just a camouflage for neo-traditionalism that brings an end to a cultural cycle. Traditionalism is associated with orthodoxy, preservation, conservativeness and unprogressiveness. Today we speak more about 'digital feudalism' instead of 'digimodernism', and yet new -isms are invented.

The term 'techno-feudalism[18]', popularised by Yanis Varoufakis, describes a new phase of economic organisation where massive tech corporations dominate digital life in ways that echo feudal structures. These companies control key digital infrastructures, extract value from user data and attention, and enforce platform-dependent interactions through opaque algorithms. In this system, wealth is not generated primarily through labour but through rent extraction, turning users into dependent tenants rather than autonomous agents. In this new order, giant tech corporations no longer compete through the production of goods or the

[17] Kirby, A. (2009). Digimodernism. A&C Black.
[18]Yanis Varoufakis (2023). Techno-Feudalism. Random House.

employment of labour but instead command the digital realm through linguistic domination. They control reality through the codes, interfaces, and algorithmic grammars that mediate nearly all communication and social exchange. A controlled semantic space is constructed in which meaning is distributed, filtered, and often predetermined. This shift resembles feudal power not only in structure but in symbolic function: language, once decentralised and open to public negotiation, is increasingly owned and administered by a new digital aristocracy. These 'cloudalists' no longer profit from what people produce but from what they say, search, and share—extracting value from words, gestures, images, and signals that pass through their systems. The digital user is no longer a speaking subject but a data-producing tenant, living on the linguistic land of a platform. Culturally, this signals the end of liberal humanist ideals of agency and expression. In place of the modern subject who speaks and acts freely, techno-feudalism installs a managed identity—calculated, ranked, and policed by hidden protocols. The language of communication becomes a medium of surveillance; the tools of expression are designed to extract behaviour. Cultural production itself—memes, posts, messages—is guided by algorithmic incentives that reward repetition, outrage, or performative novelty. Speech is no longer expressive but functional, no longer dialogic but strategic.

Power, under techno-feudalism, does not declare itself through force but speaks through code. It enacts itself in the micro-decisions of interfaces and the architecture of visibility. As such, culture is no longer made by communities negotiating meaning but by algorithms that distribute what is speakable, clickable, and shareable. In this system, meaning itself becomes a form of currency—managed, monetised, and subject to the terms of service. Language is rented in a techno-feudal economy. Techno-feudalism transforms culture into code and language into laborless rent. Meaning is no longer created freely in dialogue but leased from platforms that own the channels of expression. Postmodernism's critique of authenticity, authority, and coherence finds material realisation in this system, where culture is fragmented, voices are modulated by algorithms, and language becomes both the means and the object of control. What emerges is a techno-feudal economy of speech, where the very act of saying becomes submission to a linguistic order not of one is making but of one’s habitation.

Consolatio Philosophiae

In 'Consolatio Philosophiae' Boetius asks why we crave fame when fame itself is nothing, but the stories and memories others attach to your name? Fame is just words. For a time, you may become the hero of myths, yet to yourself, that renown holds no substance. Some people chase global renown, hoping its echo will last. But as decades pass, even the greatest legends shrink to mere names and images, two sides of a coin with no weight or meaning behind them. When honours fall upon the undeserving, they betray rather than ennoble, for false titles are exposed by the mismatch between name and quality. Riches, power, and prestigious awards cannot claim true worth when Fortune bestows them without regard for virtue. In the end, nothing in Fortune is to be sought, for she possesses no inherent good: she does not choose the worthy, nor does her favour transform the unworthy into something better. In the face of Fortune’s empty promises, true consolation lies in making peace with the inner self rather than seeking the hollow rewards of fame. In Prose VII Boetius tells the story of a certain man once launched a harsh attack on another who had assumed the title of philosopher—not in pursuit of genuine virtue, but out of vanity and a hunger for recognition. He added, with cutting irony, that the truth of his philosophy would soon be tested by how patiently he endured the abuse now directed at him. The accused man bore the insults for a time, pretending indifference, and then asked, 'Do you now see that I am a philosopher?' The reply came sharp and swift: 'I would

have—had you remained silent'. But here we are speaking of great men. And one must ask: what do they truly gain from fame, even if they seek it through virtue? What remains for them once the body dissolves in death? If death ends all, as reason strongly denies, then no glory can follow, for there would be no one left to possess it. But if the mind lives on, conscious and active beyond its mortal confines, then it must turn its gaze toward the heavens. Freed from the weight of the flesh, it will surely reject all worldly affairs, delighting instead in its release and exalting in the realm beyond, untouched by the transience of earthly praise. What lies in the silence beyond glory? True greatness does not dwell in the noise of recognition but in the stillness of integrity. Whether the soul persists or perishes, the pursuit of virtue must stand independent of fame. For if the mind endures, it seeks a higher realm; and if not, no praise can reach the silence that follows.

The paradox of knowledge—captured in the phrase 'the more you learn, the more you realise you don't know'—reveals both the boundless scope of knowledge and the inherent limits of human understanding. In the context of human limitation, linguistic obsolescence, and the epistemology of stupidity, the notion of 'unknow' becomes a central topic. At first glance, knowledge appears as a path toward clarity—a gradual mastery of a subject. Yet as one advances, the contours of that knowledge expand, not into certainty but into uncertainty. Every insight uncovers deeper layers of complexity, hidden assumptions, interconnections, and exceptions that erode the illusion of total understanding. This deepening of awareness parallels the Dunning-Kruger effect: the paradox wherein the least informed are often the most confident, while those with genuine expertise grow hesitant—not from weakness, but from the recognition that their knowledge brushes against an ocean of the unknown. In this way, intelligence becomes not an accumulation of facts but an ongoing confrontation with ambiguity. It is not what one knows, but how one endures the limits of knowing that marks true understanding. Sometimes the mask of stupidity can be a rational choice and an intelligent decision. Initial learning feels empowering precisely because it simplifies. It frames reality into manageable models, offering a false sense of mastery. But as one continues, each framework reveals its blind spots, its historical contingency, its metaphoric character. True awareness does not clarify the world—it dissolves the illusion that it can be clarified. In the digital era—saturated with information, endlessly connected yet increasingly incoherent—this paradox takes on new urgency. Algorithms promise precision yet amplify confusion. Data floods every discourse but meaning remains elusive. The more we see, the less we understand. The more we speak, the less language holds. Thus, in a world where complexity grows faster than comprehension, the first task of any future paradigm is to institutionalise epistemic humility. The 'study of stupidity' is not an insult but an admission: that our tools—language, logic, models—are always provisional, always inadequate. Intelligence begins where arrogance ends, and knowledge deepens when it acknowledges its own fragility. The paradigm of linguistic knowledge must move from clarity to humility and towards the 'ethics of unknowing'. To think deeply today is to dwell not in certainty but in complexity. The paradox of knowledge—where more learning reveals more unknowing—demands a shift from confident systems toward open-ended inquiry. The only responsible thought is one that begins with its own limits. The only sustainable intelligence is one that embraces stupidity not as error, but as the ground condition of understanding. In an age of information without wisdom, we must craft new languages that admit their own obsolescence, and new theories that begin in silence, not speech.

The first principle of new thought must be acknowledging human stupidity in the age of digital complexity. No human mind can make rational decisions based on complex digital data. We must acknowledge that stupidity is a highly likely outcome of language. If Boethius warned

us from within his cell that all fame, glory, and intellectual pride dissolve with the body then today's complexity reasserts that warning through far subtler traps. As humans, we continue to reason and to speak, though both reason and language are tools inherently unfit for the reality they aim to grasp. Our minds, wired for survival rather than truth, cling to structures—models, ideologies, and systems of meaning—that cannot account for the sheer irreducibility of the world. In this light, 'intelligence' may be defined as the ability to navigate complexity efficiently. But 'stupidity', far more common and less examined, emerges when our cognitive or cultural tools—rules, traditions, ideologies—are applied blindly, persistently, even heroically, despite their obvious mismatch with the problems at hand. The more complex our systems become—neural, ecological, technological—the more pressing this mismatch becomes. And the more information we generate, the greater our risk of mistaking noise for knowledge, data for wisdom, and linguistic maps for the terrain of reality. Language, by its very nature, compresses and distorts. It names what cannot be wholly grasped. It categorises what overflows categories. The philosopher who breaks silence to declare his virtue already undermines it—just as every -ism, every theory, every proclamation of clarity, already signals its obsolescence. All systems of meaning are planned for extinction the moment they are uttered. The true beginning of any new paradigm, then, must not be a declaration of insight, but an acknowledgment of our deep structural stupidity. The more intricate a system is—like a brain, a city, or a culture—the harder it is to describe, let alone control. This is not a metaphor. It is a law of information. And yet we continue to build ideologies, technologies, and social structures atop conceptual ruins, mistaking the simulation for substance, the interface for interaction, the algorithm for agency. Thus, we return to Boethius—not to repeat his theology, but to recover his humility. What survives the wreck of language is not certainty, but the need to confront our own incapacity. In an era of exponentially growing information, shifting identities, and recursive simulations, intelligence alone is futile. We must develop a new epistemic 'ethics of unknowing': one that begins with the confession of error, the fragility of meaning, and the inevitable obsolescence of every linguistic form. The most honest philosophy today is the one that accepts that explanation itself is a form of failure. In this failure, in this planned breakdown of meaning, lies the only path toward a deeper, more durable form of understanding.

Nobody is a prophet in his own village

There is a reason no one listens to the prophet at home. In the streets where he once played, among the people who remember his first stumbles with speech, no eloquence will make them believe he now speaks truth. The proverb 'Nobody is a prophet in his own village' captures more than local scepticism—it reveals something deeper and more disturbing: that language, no matter how refined, is always haunted by its origins in noise, babble, and play. Those who remember you before you could speak will never believe your words are divine. This is not simply a social irony—it is a structural condition of language itself. Every word is compromised by its history. Every system of meaning carries the memory of its failure. As Boethius knew, speech cannot save us; it dies with the body or is ignored by those who watched us learn to speak. And yet, we keep speaking. We build philosophies out of phonemes, nations out of narratives, religions from recitations. We try to solve with language the very problems language has created. Why do we persist in this ritual of absurd repetition—formulating new ideologies, new -isms, new forms of collective wisdom? Perhaps because stupidity is not an error in the system, but the system itself. It is the default mode of language: the endless production of abstractions that detach us from life. We think we are getting smarter, but our sophistication is only verbal. Philosophy becomes philology; wisdom becomes rhetoric; community dissolves

into communicative performance. We replace lived belonging with linguistic coherence, shared meaning with grammatically correct solitude. The more we know, the less we understand. Complexity grows faster than comprehension. Every increase in information expands the unknown. Intelligence ties to solve complexity, but stupidity clings to rules that obscure or block understanding. And yet it is those rules—social, linguistic, institutional—that govern civilisation. We are ruled not by wisdom but by collective stupidity so systematised we no longer recognise it as such.

In this sense, the death of competence is not a cultural accident—it is the logical consequence of a society that has elevated expression above substance. Expertise has been dethroned, not by ignorance, but by the democratisation of linguistic self-expression. Everyone is a speaker; no one is a listener. The educated elite overproduces language but underproduces meaning. The prophet is drowned in noise because everyone now plays prophet, but no one plays disciple. We do not form communities anymore—only teams, brands, networks. We no longer speak to each other in trust, but in tactics. Fame and monetisation replace inner calling. Language becomes not shared belief but personal marketing and there is no inner necessity to share. The most profound understanding does not need to be spoken, explained, or even thought. It only needs to be enacted. The society that cannot suspend disbelief in its own myths begins to disintegrate. Everyone starts playing their own game. The collective collapses into fragments. What follows is not barbarism but bureaucracy—the world of competence replaced by credentials, tradition replaced by technique, community replaced by calculation. So, silence is our last competence. The prophet's failure is not his message—it is the medium. His words are disbelieved because language itself is no longer trusted, because it has become too familiar, too compromised, too strategic. In a society where all speech is performance, only silence remains prophetic. Real competence, today, may lie not in knowing more or speaking better, but in recognising the limits of both. It is not through education, information, or debate that wisdom returns—but through the refusal to mistake eloquence for truth. In an age of digimodernist complexity, the greatest act of intelligence may be to speak nothing, do simply, and live outside the village where language has lost its power.

Language death is often defined narrowly: it occurs when a community no longer claims a tongue as native, and its final speaker falls silent. Yet language can begin to die long before that final breath. It dies not only when no one speaks it—but when it no longer binds people together. Language, in its essence, is not merely a tool for exchanging information. It is the architecture of community, the medium through which persons encounter one another as ends, not as means. But when language becomes instrumentalised—used primarily for control, administration, marketing, propaganda—it ceases to relate. It commands. It manipulates. It objectifies. The tongue no longer speaks; it calculates. It becomes a badge of access, a signal of status, a filter of inclusion and exclusion. Those who do not master its codes are shamed, silenced, or assimilated. This is not merely a matter of linguistic loss, but of ethical rupture. In the collapse of small tongues, dialects, or intimate speech registers, we lose more than words—we lose ways of being-with-others. Each language holds a unique grammar of relation, a singular rhythm of empathy, irony, love, and resistance. When speech becomes standard, globalised, and performative, what dies is not just vocabulary, but the trust that words are meant to hold. Even within a shared tongue, death begins when two people speak and no longer hear each other. When communication becomes one-directional—when it is used to instruct, advertise, manage, or extract—the person across from us is no longer a subject in dialogue, but a target, a market, a function. This is language's transformation from communion to control. It is the speech of systems, not of souls. We must then recognise that language death is not only

about extinction, but about inversion. It occurs when speech no longer draws us into community but separates us into silos of power, consumption, or abstraction. It is when the public tongue expands, but the private word—the whisper, the joke, the prayer, the secret—vanishes. When language ceases to be a bridge and becomes a tool, a screen, a mechanism, it begins to die—no matter how loudly or widely it is spoken. The death of language is the death of relation. To resist this, we must recover speech not as performance or transaction, but as presence—a fragile, mutual act of becoming together in meaning.

In 'The Revolution of Hope[19]', Erich Fromm envisions a new human archetype: homo esperans, the hopeful man—not the toolmaker (homo faber), the rational planner (homo sapiens), the aimless player (homo ludens), nor the defiant rebel (homo negans)—but the one who chooses to believe in our capacity for shared meaning, tenderness, and transformation. Language, in this vision, is not an instrument of persuasion or efficiency—it is the fragile, flickering bridge between souls. It is not a system, not a code, not a tool to manage others. It is a 'happening'—a momentary spark of togetherness, a shared rhythm of breath and understanding, fleeting but real. The only meaning language deeply holds is in this transient union. For Homo Esperans language is a fragile bridge towards a moments of togetherness. Carl Jung once said the opposite of love is not hate, but power. Whenever language becomes a means to manipulate, control, or impress, we lose what it was meant to hold: a mutual presence. Intelligence used to dominate is not wisdom—it is loss. A voice that seeks to conquer forfeits the chance to connect. In the name of efficiency and clarity, we filter, censor, simplify—but in doing so, we erase the trembling complexity of shared human experience. True speech is not repeatable. It lives in a moment—between two people, in a room, on a quiet evening, where something passes from one heart to another, unrecorded. Anything valuable in language must be received as if it were meant only for you. Meaning is not preserved in books, systems, or ideologies—it is preserved in you, in the trembling of your body when you were seen, heard, and held through words. The future of language does not lie in mastery, optimisation, or global control, but in intimacy. In every moment when one person speaks not to use another, but to be with them, language fulfils its only true function: communion. Homo esperans does not speaks fluently but dares to say something real to someone he loves. In that trembling instant, language lives. Language is not the house of being. It is the opposite.

1.3. Language and evil

'The First Man Was an Artist'

In 'The First Man Was an Artist' (1947) Barnett Newman, stated that undoubtedly the very first human was an artist. From the start, our ancestors expressed themselves not to ask for sustenance but to give voice to wonder and despair. A homo esperans was born, the hoping man. A man that created speech to express his hopes and dreams. The hoping men created language as a binding tool for collective imagination. In the beginning their inaugural utterance resembled song more than speech, a poetic shout born of self-awareness and helplessness before the unknown. Modern linguists recognise that if language is simply an animal ability to exchange signs, the true humanity of speech lies in literature, not in literal communication. The initial cry between primal companions was one of power and solemn weakness, an address to mystery rather than a request for water. Archaeology shows stone idols and axe-heads in the

[19] Fromm, E. (2023). The Revolution of Hope. Open Road Media.

same layers, evidence that the impulse to sculpt preceded—even suggested—the functional work of toolmaking. The image of deity was humanity's earliest sculptural act, not pottery, which only arrived with settled civilisation. Millennials later language and art became entangled in questions of beauty itself, unable to offer a transcendent message. Liberated from traditional cultural weight, some deny that language's task is to resolve the problem of communion. In an age without sublime legend or myth, refusing both pure abstraction and historical nostalgia, we seek to create revelation in its most concrete form. Our words stand on their own, accessible to anyone but without the augmented lens of the past. The speaker's true origin lies in communion impulse, preceding tool, and info. When language loses its connection to a living myth, it flounders in debates over meanings. To renew the sublime today we must produce words that reveal themselves by history's reverie.

What ancient cave paintings has to do with the emergence of language[20]? Early modern humans possessed cognitive abilities far beyond those of other primates, as evidenced by their rapid advances in toolmaking, the appearance of complex speech, and the creation of sophisticated art. One puzzling phenomenon is prehistoric cave art—pictographs and petroglyphs often located deep within chambers that are otherwise difficult to reach. Remarkably, over ninety percent of these images are hoofed animals, clustered on walls that turn out to be acoustic 'hot spots'. Recent work in archeoacoustics shows that these sites were chosen for their echoing qualities: sounds produced there reverberate in ways that resemble the percussive beat of animal hooves. We propose that such cave paintings represent a form of cross-modality information transfer, where early humans mapped acoustic impressions into visual symbols. By detecting how sound behaved in each chamber—its echoes, resonances, and patterns of reverberation—they externalised those auditory experiences as painted images. In quieter recesses of the same caves, one instead finds depictions of felines or simple dots and handprints, suggesting that artists deliberately matched subject matter to the sonic character of each space. This practice illustrates the gradual emergence of symbolic thinking that would eventually underlie full language. Such rock art may thus serve as one of the first fossilised proxies for linguistic behaviour. In this light, cave paintings are concrete evidence of the mind's transition from internal reflection to shared, symbolic expression. By painting on acoustic hot spots, our distant ancestors revealed a cross-modal leap—translating echoes into enduring symbols. These images anticipate the rise of language itself, offering a tangible record of humanity's first steps toward externalised, symbolic thought.

Cave and rock art share remarkable parallels not only with human language but early moral codes. Like speech, these ancient images serve communicative purposes, depicting actions, objects and qualities in ways that externalise inner thoughts. Rather than marginal curiosity, cave, and rock art stand as tangible records of the symbolic mind's rise—evidence that art and language co-evolved to give modern humans a decisive evolutionary edge of sociability. Cave and rock art mirror language in origin, distribution, function, and even genetic underpinnings. By externalising sound into image and thought into symbol, early humans

[20]Miyagawa, S., Lesure, C. and Nóbrega, V.A. (2018). Cross-Modality Information Transfer: A Hypothesis about the Relationship among Prehistoric Cave Paintings, Symbolic Thinking, and the Emergence of Language. Frontiers in Psychology, [online] 9. doi:https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00115.

inaugurated the shared cognitive framework that underlies 'hyperprosociality'. If cross-modality transfer helped forge our symbolic intellect, then art and language are central to the very architecture of human morality. Extremely altruistic behaviour toward unrelated individuals is a hallmark of Homo sapiens, enabling the formation of vast groups that work, fight, and live together under shared rules. The term altruism, from Latin 'alteri' (other people), reflects an evolutionary impulse seen in many social animals but taken to its highest expression in humans. In moral philosophy, actions gain value solely by their beneficial impact on others—men must serve humanity. Positivism sought genuine knowledge through reasoned, empirical observation and dismissed intuition or faith; yet altruism itself often rests on non-rational convictions or mysticism. Even so, those who give selflessly often reap personal rewards: prestige, recognition, a sense of purpose. Conspicuous altruism—the ritual display of generosity before an audience—turns self-sacrifice into social capital. States may enforce moral ideals through propaganda, laws, and the language of duty, implanting self-denial as a collective norm. Intrinsic rewards, from seeing one's name engraved in stone to receiving an honorific title, testify that no act of giving is wholly disinterested. Moreover, gift cultures and systems of debt forgiveness—non-market exchanges based on reciprocity—have been vital in shaping human societies. 'Hyperprosociality' is the uniquely human drive toward widespread altruism has underpinned our ability to build complex civilisations. Yet it is a double-edged phenomenon: a source of profound solidarity and a tool for social control.

The rituals of giving among ancient societies—such as the Kula ring of the Trobriand Islanders, the potlatch of the First Nations, or the koha of the Māori—might seem economically irrational. Men risked hardship and danger to exchange seemingly 'worthless' items. Yet these exchanges were not about utility or dominance, but about connection, obligation, and shared meaning. As Marcel Mauss showed in his seminal essay 'The Gift' (1925), such acts were not economic in a market sense but moral and social. Gifts carried symbolic value, fostering trust, alliance, and cohesion in communities where no state or market governed behaviour. Mauss revealed that these seemingly generous acts were undergirded by complex networks of reciprocity, mutual respect, and shared norms—tools not of control, but of integration. Even when rivalry was present, it was ritualised and transformed into mutual recognition. This moral economy of giving, he argued, survives today in institutions like welfare, where care for strangers is formalised and depersonalised, yet still rooted in an ethic of mutual support. Anthropological findings support this. Paleoanthropologist Curtis Marean has shown that 'hyperprosociality'—cooperation among unrelated individuals—was essential for Homo sapiens to flourish. Around 70,000 years ago, early humans began cooperating on an unprecedented scale, driven not by power, but by the symbolic communication of language and art. These tools allowed humans to build trust, share knowledge, and recognise one another as part of larger, meaningful collectives. Paradoxically, the same traits that allowed humans to cooperate—symbolic language, group identity, and altruism—also made it possible to exclude, compete, and wage war.

Yet culture offered a powerful redirection: instead of fighting, humans developed rituals of giving. In these symbolic exchanges, aggression was transformed into status-sharing and obligation, into lasting social bonds rather than destructive force. From the ancient Kula expeditions across the Pacific to lunar-timed shellfish gathering on African shores, it was the generosity between strangers—not exploitation—that built the foundations of complex civilisation. These gift economies were not primitive markets, but the scaffolding of social trust

and moral identity. Language, when used to share love, care, and mutual recognition, reveals its highest purpose. But when language is turned toward manipulation, control, or domination, its gift is lost—and with it, the heart of human sociability. Is love the true language of civilisations? May be civilisations were not built on dominance, but on the fragile courage to give without immediate return, to speak not for command but for communion? The gift—whether a trinket or a word—bound our ancestors into networks of trust that enabled cooperation on a massive scale. May be altruism, not power, lies at the root of human success?

From blood rites to word rites

The transition from sacrifice to symbol, from kinship to law gave birth to a new specie, the speaking man. In 'In Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War'(2011), Barbara Ehrenreich radically reframes the origins of human civilisation, showing that early societies were not formed around conquest, control, or dominion, but around sacrifice and survival. Her central claim is that humans were not born predators but prey—vulnerable, hunted, and bonded by fear. This foundational vulnerability laid the groundwork for a deeply rooted culture of sacrifice, which preceded and shaped all later forms of collective organisation. For millions of years, our ancestors lived in a world where death came suddenly and violently—from sabertooths, hyenas, and other large carnivores. The skeletons of early hominins are covered with claw and tooth marks, their tools rudimentary and their bodies defenceless. It was not until about 50,000 years ago that the development of more sophisticated hunting techniques began to reverse this relationship. Even then, survival remained a communal effort. The pattern of one member being killed while others escaped became etched into the human psyche, forming the first template of the sacrificial victim—a logic where one dies so others may live. This sacrificial logic, Ehrenreich argues, became mythologised across cultures: the bull or lamb offered to the gods, the shaman who crossed between worlds, the warrior who dies for the tribe. These early religious rites, saturated with blood and reverence, served to stabilise fragile social bonds. Ritual sacrifice was not only an offering to higher powers but a shared moment of symbolic violence that unified the community in awe and fear. The predator became a god, the victim, a sacred conduit. Such rituals were essential, creating meaning in death and encoding social rules through symbolic acts.

The earliest spiritual figure, the shaman, played a vital role in this transition. By embodying both predator and prey—often through trance states or hallucinogenic plants—the shaman internalised the risks of survival and translated them into communal knowledge. This capacity to imagine another's perspective, to simulate outcomes in the mind, marks a turning point in human cognition. It required symbolic language and an early form of narrative imagination. Sacrifice became not just an act, but a story—a ritualised communication of danger, hope, and redemption. The breakthrough of human symbolic capacity, occurring around 50,000 years ago, remains one of the great mysteries of prehistory. Whether triggered by neurological change, linguistic evolution, or psychoactive ritual, this cognitive revolution allowed humans to create and transmit myth, law, and moral codes. Language made it possible not only to coordinate and survive but to remember, to moralise, and to construct complex societies no longer dependent on kinship alone. This transformation is echoed in the evolution from blood rites to word rites—from sacrificial rituals rooted in familial and tribal bonds to institutions governed by laws, contracts, and shared symbols. Where once kinship and blood determined belonging, now abstract principles like justice, duty, and honour bound individuals

into communities. Sacred violence gradually gave way to sacred speech. The spoken curse replaced the thrown spear; the oath replaced the wound.

Ehrenreich also shows that the ecstasy and unity once felt during sacrificial rituals did not disappear. Instead, it re-emerged in the mass experiences of war. In the modern era, states substituted ritual bloodletting with national sacrifice. Soldiers offered their lives as the 'supreme sacrifice', and the battlefield became a secular altar. Even Clausewitz's vision of war as political calculation could not erase its religious and ecstatic dimensions. From ancient chants to national anthems, from tribal war paint to military uniforms, the transformation of men into warriors still follows a ritual logic rooted in the symbolic substitution of the self for a greater cause. Rites of passage—once marked by blood, now marked by speech, contract, or formal ceremony—continue to shape human experience. Whether in legal trials, religious conversions, or national memorials, we enact transitions through symbolic acts that mirror the old sacrificial economy. Even contemporary bureaucracy reflects this structure: highly ritualised, governed by language, abstract, yet binding. The communal ecstasy of war, too, is no longer reducible to base instinct. Ehrenreich and others reject the theory of an innate 'killer instinct', noting instead that war requires transformation through language and symbol. Soldiers do not kill as civilians; they must be re-socialised, re-scripted through rituals, drills, and collective myth. This is not nature, but culture at its most organised—language turned into a script of obedience and sacrifice. Yet this symbolic system is double-edged. Just as language enabled solidarity, law, and cooperation beyond blood ties, it also enabled the abstraction of violence—making it easier to direct aggression at strangers, to mythologise the enemy, and to glorify death. The very tools that lifted us out of blood relations also risk dehumanising others through names, categories, and legal fictions.

One of the most striking elements Ehrenreich explores is how ancient gods were imagined as carnivorous beings, demanding real food—especially meat and blood. Sacrificial offerings were, at root, acts of survival. By feeding the gods, humans fed themselves. These deities symbolised not only protection, but the predatory world humans sought to control. The rituals surrounding these offerings—slaughter, butchery, communal feasting—transformed necessity into sacred performance. Even when animal sacrifice faded, its logic remained embedded in religious narratives: from Abraham's near-killing of Isaac to Christ's death as the 'Lamb of God'. Modern religions, especially Christianity, continue to operate under the sacrificial logic of substitution: one dies that others may live. Communion re-enacts this rite in symbolic form. Bread and wine replace flesh and blood, but the structure endures. The word has replaced the wound, but it preserves its memory. René Girard deepens this insight by showing how sacrifice works not only as religious offering but as social mechanism. In his theory of the scapegoat, communal violence is deflected onto a single victim, whose death restores peace. Whether in ancient pharmakos rituals or modern military funerals, the community is bound together through the exclusion—or elimination—of one. War, in this sense, becomes a macro-sacrifice: the offering of the young for the illusion of peace, or for the consolidation of collective identity. Thus, the movement from blood rites to word rites is not a clean break but a complex transformation. The language of law, myth, ritual, and war still carries the trace of sacrifice. The courtroom, the church, the battlefield, and the state ceremony all reproduce in symbolic form what once required real blood. But this shift matters. By replacing the act with the word, humanity opened the path to negotiation, imagination, and forgiveness. Language made possible a form of connection that transcended kinship and immediate reciprocity.

And yet, language too can be misused. When used to dominate, to control, to obscure or deceive, it becomes a perversion of its original purpose. The capacity to bind through words can also be wielded to divide and destroy. The logic of love that underpinned the first acts of sharing and sacrifice is lost when language serves only to manipulate. In this light, civilisation itself becomes a fragile achievement: not the triumph of control but the evolution of mutual recognition through shared symbols. From blood to speech, from scream to song, from slaughter to sentence—we have turned the rituals of survival into languages of justice and solidarity. But only if those words are spoken in truth, and only if they serve love rather than power, can the rites of language fulfill the hope once offered at the altar. We went on the long path from scar to symbol. The history of human civilisation is a passage from bodily sacrifice to symbolic exchange, from kinship enforced by blood to communities founded on shared language. The same instincts that once demanded blood now demand meaning. Rites of war and religion have not disappeared but have taken on verbal and symbolic forms. The sacred persists, not in the knife, but in the word. And with each transition—from death to myth, from scream to sentence—we move closer to a society where love, not fear, binds us. The word is our last rite, and its proper use—toward empathy, justice, and communion—is the truest measure of our humanity.

Defence hypothesis

'To the humble seeker of biological truth there cannot be the slightest doubt that human militant enthusiasm evolved out of a communal defence response of our prehuman ancestors'.
—Konrad Lorenz

The origin of war lies not in hatred or ambition alone, but in fear—specifically, the shared fear of being hunted. Konrad Lorenz's provocative thesis, echoed by Steven M. Stanley and his Predation Hypothesis, contends that the foundations of human aggression and collective violence were not born in conquest, but in defence. Before Homo sapiens became predators, we were prey. And in that fearful beginning lies the emotional core of what would become ritual, war, and political propaganda. Language was not merely an evolutionary tool for cooperation and culture, but a weapon forged in the crucible of defence—uniting the group, warning of danger, and eventually preparing the many to fight as one. According to Defense Hypothesis as an evolutionary imperative, early hominids were cast out of the trees by climate change and forced onto predator-filled savannahs. Here, the small, slow, and physically vulnerable protohumans survived not through dominance, but through sociality. What made this transformation possible was the rise of defensive cognition: a brain shaped less by hunting tactics and more by the urgent need to avoid being hunted. Fire was first used not to cook meat, but to repel nighttime predators. Stones were first sharpened not to kill, but to shield. And language—crude at first—may have evolved from alarm cries, gradually shaping into a more sophisticated system of signals and commands. This defensive pressure left an indelible mark on human development. Our ancestors' communal life was not merely an adaptation to cooperation for hunting large game, but a necessity born of vulnerability. Social cohesion became paramount because, alone, no individual could survive. The logic of group survival shaped everything: campfire clusters, cooperative child-rearing, and emotional bonds forged by shared peril. Even the high-pitched wails of human infants—outcries disproportionate to momentary discomfort—are rooted in this ancient fear. To be left alone was to die.

Hominid social behaviour, then, was born not out of the thrill of the chase, but the anxiety of the hunted. The defence of offspring, particularly vulnerable due to the prolonged human gestation and development period, added another layer of social complexity. In predator-rich environments, children remained close to camp well into their teens, necessitating prolonged cooperation and extended family structures. Unlike other mammals, humans required not just mothers and fathers, but entire communities to raise and defend the young. This evolutionary defence imperative also shaped the division of labour and sexual dimorphism. Contrary to the image of the solitary male hunter, early human males served as peripheral sentinels, protecting the camp's outer edges. Like baboon males who position themselves as shields, early human males bore the risk first. Over time, this role shaped not only the size and strength of both sexes—since human females are unusually robust compared to other primates—but also the deep emotional bonds and long-term pair bonding necessary for coordinated vigilance and provisioning. Human sexuality, with its extended receptivity and intimacy, served the purpose of cementing group loyalty as much as reproduction. Lorenz's insight into militant enthusiasm reframes warfare not as a perverse exception to our social nature but as its extension under pressure. Once humans became capable of symbolic communication, the defence response became narrative. Danger was no longer only present—it could be imagined, remembered, and anticipated. This capacity to rehearse possible futures through language gave rise to a powerful new behaviour: collective preemption. The community, once unified against the lion or hyena, could now be unified against human threats—real or invented. From here, the leap to organised warfare was tragically short. Language, which had once warned of actual danger, now could be used to create the illusion of danger. Stories of monstrous enemies, of encroaching tribes, of threats to our women and children, became tools to mobilise the group. The same emotions once marshalled against a beast could now be turned against another people. And in this sense, propaganda is not an aberration but the linguistic mutation of an ancient scream. It is the alarm call, multiplied and rationalised, channelled into symbols, banners, chants, and commands.

But war is not simply a product of rhetoric. Its power lies in its ritual and emotional depth. As Ehrenreich and Lorenz both note, the communal ecstasy of violence—the trance of battle, the bond of shared blood—is rooted in prehistoric defence. Early myths, from Perseus to Saint George, narrate a victory not just over danger, but over fear itself. These stories encode the prestige of the defender: the one who saves the many. In every cultural tradition, the hero emerges not as an aggressor, but as a sacrificial figure who confronts danger and transforms it into meaning. This sacrificial logic is central to war's enduring emotional appeal. Early humans, unable to save everyone, likely came to accept—perhaps even ritualise—the death of one for the group. This dynamic survives in religious sacrifice, in war memorials, in the veneration of soldiers as martyrs. Warfare sanctifies death by reframing it as service. As Lorenz observed, the group finds cohesion not only in survival, but in the willingness of its members to die for it. Yet the origins of war in defence do not make it benign. If anything, they reveal its insidious power. The capacity to tell stories that bind large groups of people together—what Benedict Anderson famously called 'imagined communities'—also enables the construction of enemies. Language builds nations, but also names targets. The same words that inspire love and unity—'homeland', 'freedom', 'honour'—can be repurposed to justify violence. In this way, the development of language and large-scale social cohesion inevitably required a new form of social management: mythmaking, ceremonial identity, and if necessary, war.

Once early humans succeeded in uniting hundreds or thousands through language, they faced a new danger: other large groups, similarly organised, similarly armed. Thus, the more successful a society became at symbolic cohesion, the more urgently it had to prepare for symbolic and real conflict. Language, then, is not just a vehicle of cooperation but a tool of mobilisation—shaping not only collective memory but collective fury. The communal defence response, which once drove predators away from the perimeter of the camp, now manifests in national borders, military parades, and preemptive strikes. Rituals—whether masked dances, initiation ceremonies, or state funerals—rehearse the logic of ancient confrontation: us versus them, life versus death, prey versus predator. These rituals build emotional readiness and suppress individual moral hesitations. The soldier is not born; he is made, through a process of linguistic and symbolic transformation. The ancient rebellion against the beast, then, was never only about survival. It was a foundational moment in human identity: the choice to stand, to fight, to speak. Every time we retell the myth of the dragonslayer, of the brave defender, we echo that moment of defiance. And every time a state constructs an 'enemy', calls for 'defence', and rallies its people with slogans and flags, it draws on the same neural and cultural scripts evolved on the savannah. But this capacity is double-edged. If language made war possible, it also made peace possible. The symbolic imagination that envisions enemies can also envision reconciliation. The same narratives that inspire aggression can inspire understanding. The problem is not language itself, but its direction. The defence hypothesis does not condemn humanity to eternal war; it reveals the deep emotional currents that language taps into—and warns us of their power. The defence hypothesis traces the roots of human violence not to aggression but to fear—the ancient fear of being hunted. From that fear emerged the need for sociality, for vigilance, for the cry of alarm. Out of that cry came language. And with language, the power to unify, to remember, to imagine, and to attack. Konrad Lorenz was right: war began as communal defence. But with the rise of language, defence became story, story became myth, and myth became strategy. Today, as in the past, we speak ourselves into war—and sometimes, if we are wise, we speak ourselves out of it. Language is our most dangerous weapon, both a shield and a sword.

War is a male sport

'A rough male sport', Cormac McCarthy once wrote, 'it makes no difference what men think of war … War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting the ultimate practitioner'. McCarthy's words capture a haunting truth: war is not an accidental or occasional phenomenon in human history but a core element of civilisation itself—ritualised, gendered, sustained by language, and persistent. It is a practice shaped by biology and refined by culture, entangled with the emergence of large social structures, and enacted through the words and symbols that make collective violence possible. Language evokes war and violence as a ritual of masculine power. The first signs of warfare trace back to the Mesolithic, around twelve thousand years ago. From Spanish cave paintings of groups wielding bows in combat to mass graves in Egypt and East Asia bearing spear and arrow wounds, the archaeological record shows that war emerged not with states but with organised human communities. The precise causes—territorial competition, status, sexual access, or the need for sacrificial victims—remain debated. But the pattern is clear: war coalesced alongside social complexity, and its rituals drew from earlier human-animal struggles. Most crucially, it was language that enabled this transformation.

Without shared stories, commands, and narratives of loyalty and danger, no large-scale coordination of aggression could have occurred. Before humans turned on one another, they battled the animal world. Spears and arrows were first shaped for hunting. Tactics now associated with war—ambush, encirclement, coordinated assault—originated as survival strategies against large prey. Even in historical eras, the language of hunting persisted. European light infantry was named 'jägers' (hunters), and French skirmishers were called 'chasseurs'. Their military identities echoed the prehistoric pursuit of animal life, a symbolic link to mankind's earliest expressions of group coordination and aggression. But coordination is impossible without language. It is not the weapon that makes an army, but the command—the shouted warning, the oath of allegiance, the tale of vengeance.

As the Ice Age ended and megafauna disappeared across the globe, men who once hunted mammoths or fended off saber-toothed predators found themselves without a purpose. Human overkill—evidenced by the Clovis people's spear points found among the remains of thirty-five extinct species in North America—had done more than alter ecosystems. It had left a cultural void. In the absence of large prey, men turned their sharpened tools toward one another. The rituals of the hunt were transposed into raids and battles. The hunter's courage, cunning, and strength found new expression in human conflict. And it was language—myth, poetry, war cries—that reframed these acts not as murder, but as valour. In this context, war became a masculine performance. The hunter-defender, once essential for group survival, needed to reinvent his social role. Warfare provided this outlet. It was not only a continuation of earlier survival behaviour but an arena in which young men could prove themselves, gain prestige, and earn access to reproductive opportunities. Male identity was tied to risk, endurance, and the capacity for violence. As wild prey vanished, women did not fill the void in martial performance; instead, they were often recast as the very objects of conflict—prizes, captives, or symbols of purity to be protected or avenged. Language helped fix these roles in place. Myths, songs, and heroic epics taught boys what it meant to be men. War stories—real and imagined—created a warrior ethos and preserved it across generations. Shared narratives did more than inspire individuals; they bonded thousands into single armies, giving shape to chaos through marching chants, tribal names, and national myths. Only through language could warriors imagine a shared identity, a unified enemy, and a glorious future worth dying for. From Homer's 'Iliad' to Norse sagas and modern military anthems, war has always been told before it has been fought. This gendered division persisted across time and cultures. Even when women took up arms—as in revolutionary armies or guerrilla bands—the status of 'warrior' remained overwhelmingly male. From Homer to samurai epics, the ideal of the warrior has been shaped by an aesthetic of masculine exclusivity. Combat became the rite by which boys became men, a ritual rebirth through the shedding of blood—ideally, not one's own. The exclusion of women from this process was both practical and symbolic. They did not need to die to be reborn; they were instead the matrix of reproduction, the prizes of conquest, and the bearers of legitimate heirs.

The codification of warrior culture into hereditary elite castes marked the next phase of this male drama. Nowhere is this more evident than in the eerie parallels between feudal Europe and feudal Japan. In both, mounted warrior aristocracies—knights and samurai—emerged atop peasant populations. They wore armour, rode horses, and wielded swords imbued with spiritual or ancestral power. They rallied beneath banners, observed strict warrior codes, and received lands or titles through paternal inheritance. Catharina Blomberg calls the similarities 'entirely

fortuitous', but in truth, they reflect the convergent evolution of military technology, male dominance, and linguistic indoctrination. As weapons became more expensive and sophisticated—bronze blades, composite bows, cavalry gear—the ability to wage war was increasingly limited to a small elite. These men were not mere hunters now, but predators within human societies. The rest of the population—peasants, artisans, miners, and women—supported their warfare through labour and tribute. In this system, the warrior was not just a fighter but a parasite. Like a virus that depends on its host, the warrior elite fed off the productivity of others while preserving the fiction of protection and honour—through narrative, education, and ritual. Warrior lineages hardened into patriarchal dynasties. Sons of warriors were raised apart, trained by male mentors, and initiated into combat as the ultimate test of identity. They 'won their spurs', 'blooded their swords', or offered trophies of slaughter as tokens of manhood. Women were doubly excluded—first from the battlefield, then from the inheritance that battlefield victory conferred. They served instead as conduits of alliance, as bodies exchanged in marriage to seal treaties or end feuds. When real genealogies failed, warriors invented them. Knights traced their bloodlines to Troy, samurai to mythical emperors, Prussian officers to Teutonic crusaders. These invented lineages of honour and blood formed 'fictive families', exclusive brotherhoods bound not by maternal nurture but by the shared experience of war. Even in modern military academies like West Point, murals and mottos reaffirm this bloodline of battle—a lineage of men forged through sacrifice, glory, and martial discipline. And again, it was language that sustained this lineage. Slogans, mottos, epics, and legends turned military service into heritage, and heritage into destiny.

Battle, like ritual sacrifice, became a sacred act. The slain were not just casualties; they were offerings to history, to the gods, or to the nation. Victory mounds mirrored altars, and the language of warfare bled into religious vocabulary. To die in battle was not mere misfortune—it was a transcendent transformation, the final test of manhood and loyalty. This sacralisation of violence ensured its endurance: war was no longer just a means to an end, but an end, a rite of passage, a legacy to be inherited and reenacted. Modernity has done little to dislodge this structure. Even as states professionalised their armies and industrialised warfare, the gendered character of combat remained intact. Conscription pulled young men into the machinery of war under banners of duty and citizenship, but the underlying myth persisted: war is where boys become men, where courage is tested, and where honour is earned. Women may serve in combat roles today, but the cultural narrative still privileges male sacrifice and heroism. Monuments, war films, and national myths overwhelmingly portray the warrior as male, the battlefield as the proving ground of manhood. Language continues to serve as war’s most powerful weapon. Propaganda, national anthems, patriotic oaths, and the very naming of enemies—these are acts of speech that generate armies out of individuals. Without words, there is no nation to defend, no honour to protect, no martyrdom to achieve. From ancient battle cries to televised speeches, the transformation of men into soldiers depends not on biology but on the power of narrative. Language does not merely describe war—it incites it, directs it, justifies it, and sanctifies its costs. War is not simply a policy decision or a tragic accident. It is a deep cultural structure—one forged in the fires of prehistoric hunts, refined through patriarchal lineage, and sustained by myth, ritual, and exclusion. As large mammals vanished and ecological niches changed, men invented new enemies and new forms of glory. War became the crucible of masculine identity, the ground on which lineages were founded and defended. And it was language—through oaths, myths, commands, and stories—that turned fighting into meaning. From the first war chants to

the flags of modern nations, the logic endures: violence defines the male elite, but language makes it possible. In this sense, war is not the opposite of civilisation, but one of its founding rites. It is the stage where the performance of manhood is enacted with the highest stakes—and where its legacy is preserved and endlessly retold.

Sacralisation of war

'The soldier of Christ kills safely; he dies the more safely. He serves his own interests in dying, and Christ's interests in killing! Not without cause does he bear the sword!'
—Saint Bernard

'War is like love; it always finds a way', wrote Bertolt Brecht. But war does more than persist—it becomes sacred. In every civilisation, war has not only been justified but glorified, transfigured into divine duty, into sacrifice, into a destiny beyond individual will. What enables this transformation—what makes mass murder a moral command or a collective celebration—is language. It is language, in its most exalted and most dangerous forms—storytelling, history, mythology, religion, ideology—that has turned the carnage of war into a sacrament. It is through words that slaughter is blessed, and through narrative that soldiers are told they are saints. Combat is not sacred. It is no more noble than hunting or sport. What elevates the warrior above the mercenary or the gangster is the scaffolding of meaning that language builds around him. What separates violence from evil is explanation. As Saint Bernard understood, war becomes holy only when cloaked in ritual, symbolism, and sacred rhetoric. Throughout history, warriors have oscillated between predator and protector, horror, and hero. Gilgamesh terrorised his own people; medieval knights extorted and tormented peasants. And yet, through chronicles, hymns, and prayers, these same figures were transfigured into divine instruments. Sacred oaths, relics, and rituals did not prevent cruelty—they sanctified it. Language constructs a cosmology of conflict. It invents evil, names enemies, and ascribes metaphysical necessity to killing. The Aztec empire offers a stark example: war there existed not simply to protect or expand, but to supply the gods with blood. Victorious soldiers were celebrated not for strategy but for procuring sacrificial bodies. Hearts were cut out to the sound of chants and drums, offered to a sun that would otherwise perish. In 19th-century West Africa, kings waged war not for land or pride, but for human lives to be publicly executed in ceremonial spectacles. The knife was guided by language—the chants of priests, the explanations of scribes, the myths that rendered the victims both necessary and holy. War became a theatre of meaning.

Over time, some major religions sought to curb this literal bloodletting. Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity began to emphasise ethical life over sacrificial death. These 'post-Axial' faiths promised peace, justice, and compassion to the downtrodden—those who had always been the meat of war. Yet even as they preached mercy, they retained the language of cosmic struggle, of divine vengeance, of holy war. Their scriptures replaced ritual slaughter with metaphor, but the metaphors could still kill. In sermons and songs, the enemy remained monstrous. The idea of evil—the myth of an irredeemable other—was preserved and deployed anew. Words became weapons. Language did not stop war. It moralised it. Christianity's early pacifism did not survive the pressures of political survival. As Europe descended into tribal war and external invasions, Augustine's doctrine of the 'just war' gave theologians the tools to reconcile divine law with military conquest. Church and sword became one. Bishops blessed weapons, banners bore saints, knights were anointed with oil. The mass was said before the charge; forgiveness was granted to those who killed for God. The Crusades

completed this union of faith and blood. The Holy Land became the site of a war not just for power but for redemption. The soldier became a pilgrim, the battlefield a path to heaven. And every step was paved with words: papal decrees, holy relics, sermons, and epic poems. These were not mere propaganda—they were acts of sacralisation. The military orders—Templars, Hospitallers, Teutonic Knights—fused the monk and the murderer. They vowed poverty, chastity, and obedience—and lived to kill. They wrote chronicles that praised martyrdom in battle. Their rituals made killing a kind of prayer. The language of these orders blurred the boundary between devotion and destruction. In the Albigensian Crusade, when Christian armies attacked fellow Christians, the notorious command 'Kill them all; God will know His own' was not an act of madness—it was a linguistic justification for genocide. Words turned horror into virtue.

But language also contains its own contradiction. Just as it can sanctify power, it can inspire resistance. In France, England, and Japan, peasants rose against their lords using the deeply religious texts that had sanctified their oppression. 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was the gentleman?' became the rallying cry of English rebels. The Bible, the Qur'an, the sutras—all can be read against their hierarchies. Words are not neutral—they are volatile. The same stories that justify slaughter can also unmask injustice. The mythology of war can unravel itself. Still, the dominant function of language in war has been to extend it. In medieval Europe, the martial and the liturgical merged completely. Every ritual—every knighting, every blessing of armour, every burial under sacred stone—reinforced the story that war was a holy enterprise. The blood of enemies fertilised not just land but legend. The words carried across generations: from father to son, from church to battlefield, from page to altar. And so, war repeated itself. Not because it was necessary, but because it was meaningful. The rise of modernity did not silence this sacred echo. It translated it. Nationalism replaced sainthood. Revolution replaced crusade. But the structure remained. In the twentieth century, over 160 wars were fought. The flags changed, but the myths endured. Civilians became most of the dead. Technology made killing efficient, but it did not make it profane. Propaganda films, national anthems, heroic novels—these replaced the hagiographies of saints and knights. The sacralisation of war entered secular speech. It became the grammar of patriotism, the syntax of identity. Large armies gave way to molecular violence. Irregular militias, mercenaries, and guerrillas filled the vacuum of the nation-state. But each of them carried myths. Language remained the key: manifestos, declarations, video messages, hashtags. Every rifle came with a reason. Every massacre had its justification. The evil had to be named. The enemy had to be dehumanised. The act had to be narrated. Gender boundaries also blurred. Girls fly jets, boys wield rifles, and gender equality marches under banners soaked in the same old myths. The sacred script remains. Honor, duty, sacrifice—these are not male traits, but linguistic codes. Anyone who believes the story can join the war.

Even stripped of religion, war retains its viral logic. From tribal feuds to cyberwarfare, from chariots to drones, war changes—but the stories do not. Autonomous weapons may kill without human will, but they are still launched by words. The justification, the naming of the enemy, the authorisation to kill—these are linguistic acts. No bullet flies without a sentence fired first. And so, the most evil deeds in history—the genocides, the crusades, the bombings—were not committed by beasts but by speakers. There is no atrocity without a rationale. No slaughter without a sermon. Evil, as a concept, is a linguistic invention. It is the label that permits the act. Without stories of demons, traitors, and enemies, war could not be waged. The

act is not evil until it is explained as good against evil. To resist war is not just to oppose violence—it is to oppose the words that make it sacred. Twentieth-century peace movements understood this. They wrote songs, staged plays, published pamphlets, and chanted new mantras. They tried to desacralise war, to pull it down from its mythic pedestal. But the challenge remains immense. Because war is beautiful in the stories. It is glorious, tragic, noble. To unmake it, we must tell uglier truths. We must draft stories that make killing unbearable, not sublime. War has survived every attempt at obsolescence. Not because it is needed, but because it is meaningful. And language makes it meaningful. It turns flesh into symbol, death into sacrifice, and murder into memory. From Aztec hymns to Christian liturgies, from epic poems to state propaganda, language has always clothed war in glory. To win peace, we must fight the speech. We must unwrite the myths. We must desacralise the sword and revere the word. Because only when language stops blessing violence will war stop finding its way.

Dark side of language

'Power don't come from a badge or a gun. Power comes from lying. Lying big and getting the whole damn world to play along with you. Once you've got everybody agreeing with what they know in their hearts ain't true you've got 'em by the balls.'
Senator Roark, Sin city (2005)

The path of language passes through meaning to madness. From personal meaning towards collective madness. The dark side of language appears when it is used in large groups of people. When language first emerged, it was an act of communion. Words were gifts exchanged to share intentions, warn of danger, express love, and create belonging. But in mass societies, this sacred use of language has degenerated. What once forged bonds now builds barriers. In a culture driven by spectacle and manipulation, language no longer serves love and understanding—it serves power, darkness, fear, pain, pride, hubris, and guilt. It distorts reality, destabilises reason, and degrades truth. Its most profound degeneration lies not in its ability to offend, but in its capacity to replace authentic human encounter with illusion and noise. In mass communication, the shock value of vulgarity and obscenity replaces depth. Language becomes a performance of outrage, where every grotesque insult and taboo violation is choreographed to attract attention and provoke debate. The obscene—originally meaning 'offensive to decency'—becomes a commercial tool. What was once private and sacred is paraded for profit. Transgression loses its moral edge and is refashioned as branding. The provocateur no longer rebels to unveil truth but to accumulate influence. Each new violation of norm is a bid for cultural relevance. Yet this is not rebellion—it is the theatre of rebellion, drained of risk and bloated with ego. Real subversion illuminates the human condition; false subversion packages spectacle as meaning. This descent into spectacle mirrors a deeper collapse within the creative soul. Artists, once guardians of insight, now often navigate a culture in which originality is confused with provocation. The dark side of creativity emerges when the impulse to innovate is unmoored from responsibility. To invent is noble, but when invention is fuelled by contempt and pride, it becomes pathology. The gift of new perception is paired with the curse of alienation.

The artist, armed with language and image, extends their nervous system into society. But without a moral compass, this amplification can mutate into distortion. The language of genius can become the language of madness. Writers and poets see not just what is, but what could be. Yet if they lose their tether to community, their gifts turn inward, feeding self-importance and

disconnection. In rejecting convention, they risk losing compassion. The very tools meant to reveal the world can instead dismantle it. When creativity becomes destruction for its own sake, language is transformed into a hammer that smashes meaning rather than builds it. Creativity, then, demands more than vision—it requires discipline. Innovation must coexist with ethics, and imagination must be anchored in humility. Those who create must learn to govern themselves, to nurture the balance between solitude and solidarity. Language is not a mirror for the self alone. It is a vessel of mutual recognition. When used selfishly, it ceases to enlighten and begins to corrupt. Relentless speech is not a sign of vitality but of exhaustion. The most powerful creators understand the necessity of silence. In the pause between words, meaning ripens. In the restraint of speech, truth has time to emerge. Language that speaks constantly says nothing. Yet in the age of noise, restraint is rare. The modern world demands endless expression, and the creative soul is pressed to feed the machine. Paradoxically, the more we speak, the less we hear. The internet amplifies voices but diminishes meaning. Every message competes with ten thousand others. Quantity devours quality. In this marketplace of communication, language is weaponised. Words no longer express—they command, manipulate, shame, and incite. Truth is not argued—it is branded. Guilt is manufactured. Pride is inflated. Fear becomes policy. Language, estranged from love, becomes a poison. This transformation did not happen overnight. Its roots lie in the earliest acts of human conflict. The same evolutionary forces that fostered cooperation also birthed hostility. The modeling of the emergence of altruism during the Pleistocene, showed how intergroup violence shaped human behaviour. Those groups whose members were tightly bonded—altruistic toward one another and aggressive toward outsiders—were more likely to survive. 'Parochial altruism' combined self-sacrifice within the group with hostility beyond it. Loyalty and aggression co-evolved, not in contradiction, but in constructive collaboration. Language enabled this paradox. It taught us how to remember, how to tell stories about enemies and heroes, how to assign guilt, and how to elevate slaughter into sacrifice. Myth, legend, and religious narrative coded altruism as virtue and violence as divine duty. Guilt and pride were harnessed to forge identity. The invention of 'evil' as a category—something alien, impure, corrupt—allowed societies to turn hostility into obligation. Language made moral what instinct alone could not justify.

This moral paradox—wherein language gave birth both to kindness and to cruelty—runs through all of history. It is seen in the sacred texts that preach compassion while endorsing holy war. It is visible in nation-states that celebrate peace while funding weapons. It echoes in the propaganda that stirs soldiers to kill for freedom, and in the ideologies that paint dissenters as traitors. The most destructive deeds of our species have not been committed in silence. They have been narrated, sanctified, ritualised. The genocide, the inquisition, the bombing campaign—each was accompanied by speech. The victim was named, the evil was defined, the guilt was assigned. Language did not merely report atrocity—it created the logic to make it acceptable. In 'The Coevolution of Parochial Altruism and War[21]' Junk-Kyoo Choi and Charles Bowles elaborate on this with their concept of co-evolution between altruism and parochialism. Their models show that neither trait thrives alone. Only in combination do they produce success in intergroup warfare. Experiments among villagers in Papua New Guinea reveal this dynamic: some participants behave as 'tolerant altruists', helping all; others act as 'parochial altruists',

[21]Choi, J.-K. and Bowles, S. (2007). The Coevolution of Parochial Altruism and War. Science, 318(5850), pp.636–640.

fiercely loyal to their own and punitive toward outsiders. These patterns cannot be explained by kinship alone. They reflect cultural transmission—how language, ritual, and storytelling embed social norms into human behaviour.

Thus, the speaking man becomes the planet's most invasive species—not because of brute force, but because of language. Language is the force multiplier of culture. It carries knowledge, but also prejudice. It spreads compassion but also hate. It encodes memory, but also myth. Powell and colleagues emphasise the role of demography in preserving culture: only when populations reach a critical size can ideas—tools, rituals, and language—be maintained. This feedback loop explains why Homo sapiens, once few, now dominate the globe. Not through strength, but through stories. Yet in telling these stories, we tell ourselves lies. We forget that language is not neutral. We act as if words are just air, harmless and weightless. But history proves otherwise. Every empire was built by speech before it was built by sword. Every war was waged in dialogue before it spilled blood. Every shame, every humiliation, every silencing—these are acts of language. The dark side of language is not that it offends, but that it imprisons. It convinces millions to kill and to die. It convinces us that guilt is virtue, and pride is strength. So, what remains of language's promise? Can it still serve communion, or has it been corrupted beyond recovery? The answer lies not in censorship but in vigilance. We must become custodians of the word. We must guard against its misuse and refuse to traffic in slogans that reduce people to enemies. We must remember that the value of language lies in its capacity to reveal—not to obscure, to unite—not to divide. If we forget this, we will continue to speak ourselves into darkness. Language was born to connect us. But in the age of mass society, it threatens to sever us completely. It is a tool more dangerous than fire or steel—because it shapes what we believe is real. If used with love, it creates peace. If used with fear, it destroys. The degeneration of language is not just a symptom of decline—it is the decline itself. It is the corruption of communion, the loss of meaning, and the silence of truth beneath a flood of noise. At the end, it is a matter of scale.

Language creates evil

In his remarkable 1957 essay collection 'Literature and Evil'[22] Georges Bataille insists that 'literature is not innocent', contending that only when it embraces its entanglement with the knowledge of evil can it speak with true power and depth. For Bataille, the essence of literature is not in moral instruction or entertainment, but in its confrontation with the darkest dimensions of the human condition. Language, when refined into literary form, becomes a tool for exploring violence, lust, rage, and existential dread. And it is only by plunging into this abyss that literature becomes sovereign—commanding not through virtue, but through exposure. Literature, in this view, must not serve social progress or moral comfort; it must risk madness and revelation by engaging with our impulses to harm, to dominate, to desecrate. In doing so, language reveals its double nature: both a bridge toward communion and a portal to the demonic. The act of writing becomes an act of complicity, one that demands a radical form of moral courage: not to justify evil, but to name it without flinching. Language, thus, ceases to be a neutral instrument and becomes a volatile force—capable of creation and destruction in equal measure. True literary communication, Bataille argues, is impossible without risk. The writer

[22] Bataille, G. (1973). Literature and Evil.

must vanish into the work, as the reader dissolves into the act of interpretation. In this sacred moment, the individual disappears and only language remains: raw, sovereign, and unbound. The result is not mutual understanding in the ordinary sense, but a kind of creative violence—tearing away conventions and exposing the psychic residue beneath. When language dares to abandon clarity or comfort, it ceases to be communicative in the typical sense. It becomes ecstatic, deranged, prophetic. The so-called 'mad writer' or 'visionary artist' embodies this transformation, transgressing the boundaries of acceptable discourse to forge new realities. In this state, miscommunication is not a failure—it is a signal that language has reached its outer limit and crossed into something sacred and dangerous.

At its most potent, literature is born from anguish. It thrives not in harmonious societies but in collapse—in the slippage of norms, the horror of trauma, the lure of transgression. It forces its readers into confrontations with their own unspoken desires and disowned fears. Writers become agents of rupture, unsettling our pretences with scenes of eroticism, decay, cruelty, and absurdity. Language reveals the cracks, not its cohesive logic. This destabilising effect is not accidental—it is the very purpose of the artistic gesture. The writer does not build up; they dismantle. Literature, in this sense, is a machine for moral inquiry that begins in pain and ends in ambiguity. Through suffering, shame, and perversion, language acquires its full tragic depth—no longer a mirror for virtue, but a canvas for monstrosity. Transgressive art, as a genre, deliberately courts this degenerative power of language. To transgress is to cross a line—not just socially or politically, but metaphysically. Transgression becomes a linguistic ritual—a dark liturgy that recruits its audience as initiates into a forbidden priesthood. Rituals of power and secrecy reappear in the language—coded, fractured, perverse—are not accidental. They are engineered to elicit loyalty through confusion, to forge allegiance through dread. In some circles, language ceases to be a shared code and becomes an incantation—a way to manipulate reality through carefully crafted aberration. Surrealism, too, pursued this descent into the grotesque. The unconscious must speak and dream logic is elevated above rationality, calling for a 'sur-reality' where contradictions fuse. In surrealist works, images crash against each other like waves: broken dolls, bleeding clocks, melting faces. The 'grotesque'—once a term for decorative excess in Roman art—now becomes a mode for existential alarm. Its disproportion and distortion are meant to awaken us. These are not aesthetic decisions but moral shocks, intended to break the tyranny of the ordinary. Such art has no room for harmony; its purpose is rupture, to summon what has been exiled to the subconscious. Shock is not a means of amusement, but of initiation. Only through revulsion can we come to see. Language here serves not to clarify, but to rupture—to fracture consensus and let in the sublime horror of truth.

Yet this descent has limits, and not all transgression is legitimate. There is a difference between art that reveals and art that merely wounds. When the language of art spills into the language of politics, the boundary between fiction and violence grows thin. What begins as symbolic transgression becomes real-world cruelty. In such cases, the absolution of art is no longer sufficient. When evil moves from the page to the street, we are forced to ask: what has language unleashed? Transgressive literature—may intend to remain symbolic, but its aesthetic of nihilism risks glamorising the very behaviours it depicts. And in a society increasingly driven by viral media, shock has no clear limits. The logic of transgression becomes self-replicating: each new work must outdo the last. Eventually, language becomes a theatre of perpetual escalation—a spiral of outrage in which meaning is sacrificed for spectacle. The transgressive hero often takes the form of an alienated, antisocial voice: cold, ironic, violent, or simply numb.

Such characters are not aberrations—they are prototypes of postmodern identity. They navigate a world of broken taboos and fractured norms, revealing a deeper truth: evil is not some foreign substance but an element of ourselves. In 1963, Michel Foucault's 'Preface to Transgression' reframed this confrontation with taboo as the engine of human freedom. To cross every line was not to fall, but to ascend—toward sovereignty, toward truth. But what does this freedom serve? Transgressive art often unites its followers through a shared sense of revulsion. 'We who understand this darkness', it says, 'belong together'. It creates cults of the initiated—those willing to stare into the abyss and name what others will not. Yet every tribe needs a boundary. Division is essential to the function of transgression: you cannot rebel without something to rebel against. As such, the power of language lies in its binary nature. It separates 'us' from 'them', 'pure' from 'impure', 'hero' from 'villain'. Language, then, is the birthplace of evil—not in the ethical sense, but as a mechanism of exclusion. To name the outsider is to cast the first stone. Evil is not a supernatural force—it is the product of linguistic division, of the endless need to delineate one self against another.

In our digital age, this tendency reaches its apex. Language fragments into tweets, slogans, memes—each a unit of meaning designed not for understanding, but for reaction. Data is collected in binary: yes or no, friend or foe, good or evil. Entire systems of control are built on this fragmentation. Villains are manufactured by algorithm; consent is rallied through linguistic panic. Language, once the medium of communion, becomes the apparatus of control. Surveillance is linguistic: your likes, clicks, and keywords become the map of your self. In this system, evil is not done by monsters but by interfaces. It is coded, modular, invisible. We must acknowledge that digital language is not innocent. Its complexity does not elevate us—it multiplies our capacity for domination, shame, and manipulation. To redeem it, we must pass through its darkest chambers, see what it has become, and imagine what it might still be. Only by confronting language's complicity in evil can we hope to reshape it—not into a weapon, but into a new form of communion. Language, in its highest refinement, does not only liberate—it corrupts. As it grows in nuance and abstraction, it begins to articulate what instinct cannot: cruelty, humiliation, obsession, destruction. Literature and art, when honest, become accomplices in this descent, guiding us through the shadows with unflinching gaze. Yet in doing so, they offer not damnation but transformation. Evil does not originate outside us; it emerges from the names we give, the stories we tell, the lines we draw. The future of language—and of humanity—depends on our willingnfull seduction of its darker powers. Speech cannot back return to its original promise: not as domination, but as shared becoming. The sovereignty of speech is a dangerous notion, it means independence from human laws and morals.

The essence of evil

Evil is not a primal force lurking in the depths of human nature—it is a linguistic construction, born from the same power that builds civilisations and commands armies. Language is the house of Being, as Heidegger declared, but it is also the home of evil. In language Being and evil live together. Only through language can we understand, define, and propagate evil. It does not exist independently in nature; it is a concept that requires language to come into being. It is a judgement, a classification of behaviour as profoundly immoral, and it relies entirely on the existence of moral frameworks, which themselves are made of words, grammar, and narratives. To call something evil is not to describe an essence but to impose one, to pass judgement in accordance with laws and values that only exist because language made

them possible. The concept of evil exists nowhere outside of speech. What we call evil is a product of moral codes, religious rules, and legal norms—all articulated and transmitted through language. Without language, there is no morality, and without morality, there is no evil. Even the most horrific act is not 'evil' in itself; it becomes evil when a society, through language, defines it as such. This is why evil grows in the shadow of language: the more elaborate our linguistic systems become, the more sophisticated our notions of guilt, punishment, and wickedness. Language provides not only the labels but also the entire structure in which moral condemnation can take place. Evil grows larger in groups of people who share a common language. In every civilisation, from ancient empires to modern nation-states, language has served both as a building block of culture and a tool for moral order. Through shared vocabulary and moral narratives, entire populations are conditioned to fear, hate, or punish certain behaviours or individuals. Mass communication turns evil into a public concept—a social threat to be contained. Just as language enables law and poetry, it also enables propaganda and demonisation. War begins with words: slogans, speeches, manifestos. Before the first shot is fired, language has already shaped the enemy as evil and the army as righteous. Evil is thus not just judged—it is manufactured, strategically deployed to unite some people and alienate others. In the name of good, evil is named, repeated, and enforced.

The need for evil is functional. It stabilises societies by designating a moral boundary. What would law be without transgression? What would religion be without sin? Evil provides a contrast, a shadow against which good is illuminated. Without the language of evil, we lose the very tools by which we construct moral life. But in constructing it, we also construct fear. Fear of punishment, fear of deviation, fear of the other. Evil becomes the price we pay for order. It does not emerge naturally; it is summoned by the act of naming. The witch, the heretic, the traitor, the criminal—all are created in the act of saying their name. In ancient literature and philosophy, the danger of truth was already tied to the danger of knowledge. The wisdom of Silenus, recorded in fragments from Aristotle and echoed by Sophocles, speaks to a dark insight: that to be born is itself a misfortune. This antinatalist thought—that non-existence is preferable to life—expresses a horror at human suffering that language alone makes thinkable. Without speech, the thought cannot form; without words, there is no curse, no lamentation. Writers such as Flaubert, Schopenhauer, and later Cioran would echo this dread. But it is language that holds it. The despair, the moral weight of existence, is not a purely emotional response—it is a constructed reflection. The human animal suffers, but only the human speaker suffers with full knowledge of suffering and gives it a name. For Heidegger, language is not just a means of communication—it is the very medium through which being is revealed. We dwell in language; it is the structure of our world. Language gathers reality and offers it to us as meaningful. But this very act of gathering is also an act of excluding. To say what something is, is also to say what it is not. Binaries arise: good and evil, true, and false, self, and other. The house of being becomes the house of division. Once these oppositions are named, they take on a life of their own. Evil exists only in relation to good, and it must be continuously named and re-named to keep that opposition alive.

Language is not merely expressive—it is performative. To call an action evil is to do something with that word: to judge, to condemn, to punish. Law, theology, and politics all rely on these performative judgments. When we describe someone as evil, we do more than report—we enact a ritual of separation. We remove them from the realm of the human. This is why public discourse so often reaches for the term 'evil': it is the ultimate expression of moral

distance. And in doing so, it generates power. The speaker gains authority, the audience gains clarity, and the condemned loses their claim to empathy. In this way, language governs our ethical life, not by reason alone but by its power to declare. This is why literature, philosophy, and even science must reckon with language's dual nature. Language is our most profound gift, but it is also our greatest threat. Heidegger warned of its danger: it stands apart from the world and introduces delusion. Yet it also allows beings to show themselves, to matter. Poetry, in this sense, becomes the purest form of language—it lets being emerge without dominating it. But even poetry is not innocent. As Georges Bataille said, literature is not innocent. It carries within it the knowledge of evil. It thrives on the taboo, the transgressive, the dark. Only when it touches the forbidden does it gain intensity. Evil is not outside literature—it is its secret heart. Structuralism and post-structuralism added further insight. Structural linguistics taught that meaning is created not by individual words but by their position in a system of differences. Evil, then, is not a substance but a position—a slot in a moral grid. Post-structuralists like Derrida showed that no such structure is stable. The meaning of evil shifts, and its location in the grid changes with ideology and discourse. What was once called evil may now be called justice, and vice versa. This instability reveals that evil has no essence apart from its linguistic role. It is a necessary fiction that serves different masters across time.

In the digital age, this fiction becomes even more volatile. Online discourse spreads accusations of evil like wildfire, and language becomes the weapon of choice. Cancel culture, moral outrage, public shaming—all function through the rapid assignment of moral categories. Words like 'toxic', 'abuser', or 'traitor' trigger a cascade of consequences. Here again, evil is not observed—it is spoken into being. Technology merely amplifies what language has always done: create meaning, impose order, and exclude the unfit. Finally, evil is not a fact of nature. It is a necessity of speech. It arises when we assign meaning to suffering, wrongdoing, and fear. It crystallises in the legal codes, religious commandments, and public condemnations that shape human communities. Language gives it form, sustains it through repetition, and uses it to police the boundaries of belonging. We need the concept of evil to stabilise morality, but we must also recognise that in naming it, we create it. The essence of evil, then, is not in the act but in the naming. Language does not merely reflect evil—it produces it. To understand evil is not to look deeper into the heart but to listen more carefully to the words. It is to ask how judgments arise, how narratives are shaped, and how names become sentences. Language is our house—but in that house, evil also dwells. It waits in every moral rule, every binary opposition, every tale of virtue and transgression. It is not beyond speech; it is speech. And only by questioning the words we use to judge can we ever hope to disarm it.

A constructed reality

Language can create worlds more convincing than any machine. You do not need the Matrix's batteries and neural links—just words, myths, slogans, ideologies. These linguistic towers—whether religion, politics, science, or economics—build imagined realities that feel as real as bricks and mortar. Without hope and rife with despair, such language can distort individuals and entire societies until cities collapse into collective madness, like the asylum in Chekhov's 'Ward No. 6'. Whoever controls the narrative controls the sanity of the many. Language, at its best, gives shape to truth. At its worst, it can hollow out meaning. In ruination, words become weapons without purpose. When delivered from the mouths of authority figures

or mass media, despairing stories of decline, betrayal, or apocalypse become self-fulfilling prophecies. Repetition of such talk warps shared perception—until hope itself disappears, and lives unravel. People begin to walk blindly through their days, as if a slow mental decay has been imposed by language alone. Chekhov's 'Ward No. 6' offers a grim parable. Dr. Ragin, elite physician and man of reason, drifts into apathy and philosophical detachment. He surrounds himself with talk of suffering that does not feel personal—abstract words that numb empathy. Patients like Gromov live this talk, bound by despair made credible by the same language that once formed medicine and civics. When Ragin finally internalises those narratives—when he hears despair not as theory but as reality—he stops just short of madness before literally succumbing. His transformation reveals how language can engineer an entire mental collapse, not through violence but through relentless speech and thought. The story foreshadows a modern disease of discourse: the rise of language saturated by despondency. Experts, pundits, and elites spin tales of decline, crisis, and decay. The message is everywhere: 'No future', 'Everything is falling apart', 'Save the earth, don't give birth'. The more this is repeated, the more it becomes part of the 'common sense'—the constructed reality of society. When people live in that shared depression, they act accordingly. Neighbourhoods die, institutions decay, communities fragment. The language constructs the reality, and the reality becomes inevitable.

This pattern emerged in the Enlightenment, where hope blossomed alongside reason: 'sapere aude'—dare to know. But it also produced its opposite: the Counter-Enlightenment. Romantic thinkers began to reject progress for nostalgia and gloom. They rejected rationalism in favour of feeling, and gradually, suspicion, despair, and mysticism replaced hope. Language, once a scaffold for growth, became a tool for retreat. Words like 'decadence', 'crisis', and 'entropy' crept into public discourse, sharpening the sense that categories built with faith—liberty, fraternity—had already failed. Ironic slogans and cynical aphorisms turned the idealist's vocabulary into weapons against critique itself. In 'The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge' (1966), Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann argued that social reality is constructed through repeated interaction—the conversational cement of meaning. Institutionalised speech becomes a habit. When these habits are soaked in negativity, false assumptions, or division, they harden into frameworks of despair. Phrases like 'we're screwed', 'all politicians lie', or 'society is broken' layer over daily life. They steer public behaviour and feeling—even when facts contradict them. Once installed, these narratives frame everything else. You do not just lose hope—you lose the language to conceive hope, and with it, the categories of possibility. This is how cities become madhouses. If the buildings remain standing, the shared imagination collapses. A megalopolis can host thriving economies and brilliant arts—but if citizens live in a linguistic environment permeated by fear, blame, and resignation, then the spirit fades. You find Professor Ragin figures everywhere: educated, well-paid people circling around despair, repeating liturgies of weariness in meetings, monologues, and social media. Each repetition advances the ward's walls.

The cure lies in changing the language—not by ignoring facts, but by shifting imagination. Hope is not blind denial; it is the creation of new vocabularies and collective visions that invite agency. You need stories like 'We've faced worse before and prevailed'. You need niches where people speak of rebuilding, not collapse. You need structural metaphors—gardens, communities, renewal—to reclaim the symbolic centre. Real change happens when narrative shifts toward possibility, ambition, and receipt of responsibility, rather than despair. The system that traps individuals is rooted in language that normalises madness. When you learn to see the machinery of constructed despair, you begin to dismantle it. You remove the chains of words one by one. The ward cracks open. The city breathes again. This is the battleground of the present. Digital technologies flood us not with windows on the world but

with repetitive affirmations of doom. Algorithms prefer despair—it drives traffic. Outrage has more shareability than hope. But hope can be rebuilt through language. Vocabulary is political; metaphors matter. The terms we use to describe 'the crisis' shape how cities act. If we define ourselves as 'running out' or 'destroyed', we become so. If we call ourselves 'resilient, proceeding, renewing', we open space for action. Language is not a neutral medium—it is a force. It can preserve sanity or construct a lunatic asylum, even in a thriving democracy. Civilisation teeters at the edge of madness when despair is preached as truth. But if we learn to intervene in language—if we critique our own metaphors, invent new ones, and resist the monetisation of fear—we can repair the rupture. No systems are too complex to escape. Narratives can be rewritten. Doom becomes data, and data can become design. We need narratives of repair, collaboration, regenerative economics, and circular systems. Tiny nodes of positive language can propagate like vaccination—each new conversation weakening despair and strengthening conviction. 'A constructed reality' demands vigilance. Anyone who controls the narratives controls whether society remains hopeful or decaying. We must guard against the architecture of despair that builds quietly in boardrooms, newsrooms, and social media feeds. Naming the trap is the first step. Then comes the work of constructing new stories that align with human dignity. Chekhov's 'Ward No. 6' reminds us that intellectual detachment, maintained too long, becomes self-destruction.

The remedy lies in using language as a source of engagement and compassion, not detachment. One must speak his hopes, not just his woes. People must create rooms full of words that heal rather than punish, that connect rather than isolate. Only then can we reclaim our shared world—and our shared language. In his 'Questions sur les miracles' (1765), Voltaire warns how power corrupts the inner voices of judgment. His claim—'whoever can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities'—is not merely rhetorical. It reveals the logic of submission: once the mind accepts the impossible, the heart can be led to accept the unforgivable. When belief is severed from reason, morality becomes malleable. Religious and ideological crimes, for Voltaire, do not begin with violence but with irrational obedience to language. The surrender of thought precedes the surrender of conscience.

'Formerly there were those who said: You believe things that are incomprehensible, inconsistent, impossible because we have commanded you to believe them; go then and do what is unjust because we command it. Such people show admirable reasoning. Truly, whoever can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities. If the God-given understanding of your mind does not resist a demand to believe what is impossible, then you will not resist a demand to do wrong to that God-given sense of justice in your heart. As soon as one faculty of your soul has been dominated, other faculties will follow as well. And from this derives all those crimes of religion which have overrun the world'.
Voltaire's 'Questions sur les miracles[23]' (1765)

The risk society

A society does not inherit its structure from fate, biology, or even history—it inherits it from its own imagination. The language we speak, the stories we tell, and the categories we accept shape the very architecture of social life. Ulrich Beck's theory of the risk society compels us to see that the future is not determined by the risks we face, but by how we describe them.

[23] Torrey, Norman Lewis (1961). Les Philosophes: The Philosophers of the Enlightenment and Modern Democracy. Perigee Books.

Narratives are not innocent; they structure the horizon of possibility. If society is built from language, then the kinds of lives we can lead are determined by the grammar of our hopes and the syntax of our fears. In Beck's risk society, the dangers we face—nuclear war, environmental collapse, pandemics—are not natural catastrophes, but human-made uncertainties. These are not accidents; they are engineered side effects of progress. But what makes them powerful is not their materiality—it is the way they are named, publicised, denied, or normalised. The control of mass communication, more than the control of any physical resource, determines how people imagine what is safe, what is dangerous, and what is worth sacrificing. Risk, like everything else, is a linguistic event before it is a material fact. The role of sociology in such a world is no longer to explain society from a distance but to engage with the scripts that define it. Zygmunt Bauman reminds us that too often sociologists become bureaucrats of imagination—writing authorised interpretations of reality that serve institutions rather than individuals. What we need is not a new sociology of prediction, but a sociology of storytelling. If the world is a screenplay, who is the director? Who is the audience? And who holds the pen? The key lies in the stories we choose to accept. The Enlightenment once promised that reason would lead us to freedom, but today reason is entangled in systems that produce risk for some and privilege for others. Scientific rationality, once a language of emancipation, now speaks through opaque networks of expertise and administration. Its authority is no longer self-evident; it must be continually narrated into legitimacy. Counter-Enlightenment movements—Romanticism, traditionalism, populism—did not arise merely as political resistance but as linguistic responses. They offered alternative narratives, myths of lost purity, dignity, and rootedness. Some of these turned toxic, yet their success proves a vital point: people do not organise their lives around data but around meaning.

To live well in a risk society, we must begin to speak differently. We must replace fatalistic scripts of inevitable decline with stories of resilience and responsibility. Just as societies once told themselves myths of divine kings or chosen peoples, we must now invent a narrative of shared vulnerability and mutual care. A sustainable future requires a sustainable imagination. In 'Childhood and Society'(1950) Erik Erikson warned that in a world driven by consumerism and quantification, people lose the distinction between having and being. Identity becomes a property, a label, a commodity. 'I have a job', 'I have followers', 'I have worth'. But what about being? In the 'to have' mode, people become inventories of traits rather than participants in relationships. Their value is defined externally, and their stories are no longer authored from within. Identity is always a risk. It requires standing for something not given, something not guaranteed. To be oneself is to speak a new language, not just repeat inherited roles. But in our age of systems, many drift from office to office, not as persons but as files, cases, and digits in a database. Here, Beck's insight returns: whoever controls the language of risk controls the value of a person. If you can name someone as deviant, unsafe, or unproductive, you can erase them socially—no jail required. Only a word. A different society is possible. Not one without risks, but one that distributes them more justly. This will not happen through law alone—it begins with changing how we speak about ourselves. From 'citizen' to 'consumer' is a collapse in language. To recover political agency, we must recover narrative agency. We must write new scripts in which dignity is not indexed to productivity, and risk is not outsourced to the voiceless. The world of modern humans was never one of settled identities. As Marshall McLuhan wrote, the hunter's world was one of movement, adaptation, and alertness. To hunt is to live in improvisation—not to manage a system but to meet the world as it comes. Hunters live without guarantees. Their survival depends not on permanence but on sensitivity. And in the modern media environment, where stories hunt minds and symbols shape behaviour, we are again returned to that primal task: paying attention, improvising meaning,

and remaining awake. Print culture forged a public sphere, uniting strangers in shared language. But television and the internet do not unite—they fragment. They return us to tribalism, but without intimacy. Now the 'public' is a managed hallucination, a target market, an analytics chart. The medium that once demanded deep attention now floods us with shallow distraction. And in the process, we lose our voices to voices more algorithmically optimised than ours. To reclaim narrative is to reclaim agency. We must learn to draw again—to mark the world with intention. Language must become a tool not just for transmitting information but for creating presence. As in art, the value of a sentence is not what it describes, but what it evokes.

David Graeber and David Wengrow, in 'The Dawn of Everything'(2021), tell us that inequality was never a biological destiny. Human groups shifted between egalitarianism and hierarchy depending on context, season, ritual, and belief. Language was always central. It was language that turned gifts into debts, relatives into servants, and memories into laws. It was language that first codified power, and it is language that can unmake it. This is the promise of the risk society: to see that the future is not yet written. And that even our deepest inequalities can be transformed—not through revolution alone, but through revision. A civilisation that wishes to survive must become literate again in its own fictions. For every entrenched injustice, there once existed a story that made it seem necessary. To build a better world, we must become storytellers again—courageous enough to name a different kind of life. True civilisation is not the endless accumulation of power but the wisdom to alternate between solitude and communion, hierarchy and sharing. Our ancestors did this seasonally. Today, we are trapped in static roles. People have forgotten that every structure is temporary, that every city was once a camp, that every empire began with a myth. If inequality feels eternal, it is because we have stopped imagining its alternatives. Citizens no longer play with power—they submit to it. But play is a political act. It reveals that rules are chosen, not given. And once revealed, they can be rewritten. Societies are stuck not with inequality, but with the language that justifies it. Families became laboratories of coercion, turning care into control. Possessions became signs of virtue. Titles replaced names. Over time, language turned life into property and property into identity. And that is the root of risk: not the threat of catastrophe, but the threat that we will accept it as normal. A different society is possible. But only if we speak it first. A different language means a different world, but necessarily a better one. The risk society is not just a phase of modernity—it is a linguistic condition. Risk becomes unbearable not when it grows too large, but when it becomes unspeakable. Inequality becomes permanent not when it is unstoppable, but when it becomes unnameable. The stories we tell determine the futures we inherit. If we want a society with less risk and more equality, we must begin by speaking differently—by rejecting the fatalism of existing scripts and writing new ones grounded in dignity, imagination, and care. Whoever controls the narrative controls the structure of reality. And so, to transform the world, we must begin not by seizing power—but by reclaiming the pen.

'The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently.'

-David Graeber, Adam Curtis's BBC documentary series, 'Can't Get You Out of My Head'

1.4. Pathology of indoctrination

Genealogy of speech

Every language carries within it the seeds of its own undoing. Speech is not merely a tool of communication—it is the engine of a cycle that begins with conspiracy, peaks in

indoctrination, settles into consensus, and then collapses into its own shadow, ready to begin again. This is the genealogy of speech: a recurring pattern in every polity, movement, tribe, and digital echo chamber. It is driven less by material conditions than by the narratives constructed—and the human hunger for order. Conspiracy marks the initial stage. It asserts that everything taught is false. The powerful deceive. The truth remains hidden. Conspiracies thrive in the fertile ground of secrecy and exclusion, particularly among those marginalised or alienated. The conspiratorial mindset revels in forbidden knowledge—secret meetings, hidden documents, coded messages. Its energy does not derive from facts but from the thrill of rebellion against accepted norms. Language becomes weaponised. Words form enclaves of suspicion—whispers, memes, chants, rituals that bind initiates and repel outsiders. Yet conspiracy alone cannot endure. It must evolve. The next stage is indoctrination—when the subversive narrative becomes doctrine. The story gains structure, polish, and institutional tone. It now attracts those who consider themselves thoughtful and discerning. Indoctrination no longer depends on secrecy but draws authority from its presentation. Adherents place trust in their refined inner voice and ridicule the conspiratorial mind as chaotic and crude. At this point, language is codified: frameworks, curricula, hashtags, citations, and sermons emerge. Authority is not imposed by force but by repetition—rhetorical rhythm, logical scaffolding, and media cycles that shape belief. Both conspiracy and indoctrination feed on repetition—not of content, but of cadence—a liturgical beat that separates believers from sceptics. Division, not unity, becomes the strategic function. In each case, language manufactures identity. The conspirator feels elevated by access to hidden truth. The indoctrinated feels superior in rejecting outsider folly. But the result remains the same: a closed group governed by language and belief.

The ruling principle is not merely domination, but shaping—language establishes consensus and channels groups toward shared objects of reverence. These may be trivial or monumental: a cathedral, a slogan, a formula, a national anthem, or an abstract ideal like 'progress'. Often, the practical meaning fades. What remains is a symbol—pure beauty, sacrifice, or order. Narrative complexity rises. Layers of commentary form. Traditions build upon one another. Eventually, no single individual fully grasps the totality of the ideological structure. Meaning diminishes as structure grows. The peak of the cycle comes when indoctrination congeals into consensus. At this stage, the doctrine no longer needs persuasion. It is perceived as natural. Its language saturates institutions, schools, media, and casual speech. Its origins are forgotten; its assumptions go unchallenged. Compliance becomes habitual. Legitimacy no longer justifies itself—it simply exists. The cathedral has been completed. The myth performed. The script internalised. Yet success sows decay. The system becomes inert. Belief becomes ritual. Speech hardens into jargon. The grand narrative collapses under its complexity and rigidity. At this moment, dissent stirs. Somewhere, someone begins to question the orthodoxy, whisper alternatives, suggest that reality is otherwise. A new conspiracy is born. The cycle recommences: Conspiracy. Indoctrination. Consensus. Collapse. Conspiracy.

This cycle is linguistic before it is political. Its engine is not ideology but rhetoric. Shifts occur through stories, chants, headlines, memes, and coded expressions. Power flows through those who control the discourse—from sacred texts to corporate presentations, from political manifestos to algorithmic suggestions. Novelty governs the process. Attention follows news more than truth. A new phrase, a surprising claim, a counterintuitive metaphor—these hold more influence than sober fact. Both conspiracy and indoctrination exploit novelty. Language is constantly updated: updated terms, revised histories, refreshed imagery. As novelty accelerates, the cycle spins faster. Only specialists can navigate the lexicon of any ideology. These ideologies become mazes. Every attempt at coherence adds complexity. Schools, sects, institutions, and parties layer over one another. At a certain point, linguistic complexity reaches

a threshold where meaning becomes unreachable. The priests of the system speak in tongues the public no longer understands. The average person cannot express themselves without navigating code, jargon, or threat. All becomes encoded, layered, obscure, or authoritarian. Consensus ossifies into dead language. Once it fails, the cycle begins again. A new conspiracy takes root—not from irrationality, but from cultural amnesia. No one remembers how the previous structure was born. History blurs. The language of the old order grows impenetrable. New stories surface from the margins. Initially absurd, they attract followers. Symbols, chants, rituals emerge. The pattern reforms. Language is not neutral in this process. Its ecology determines whether speech connects or commands. When communication becomes code—legal, political, technical—genuine connection collapses. Individuals speak to roles, not to other people. Meaning breaks in transmission. Strategy buries sincerity. The medium becomes a prison. An alternative does not lie in escaping language but in reforming its function. Polyphony—multiple voices—can interrupt the cycle. Shared discourse spaces can delay or soften the hardening of conspiracy into indoctrination. Self-aware storytelling, resistant to orthodoxy, can keep the pattern alive without calcifying. Above all, sincerity and simplicity in language have the potential to puncture the illusion of control.

What then are the laws of novelty in language? Novelty—defined as the sheer presence of the new—carries more force than truth or coherence. Consider the syntax of Master Yoda: ancient ideas gain appeal through syntactic surprise. Novelty itself is neither moral nor immoral. It draws strength from contradiction until saturation leads to collapse. As societies seek stability through tradition, novelty accelerates. Old ideologies crumble, while commerce, media, and politics generate new layers of linguistic excess. These systems grow ornate—too complex to function—eventually demanding deconstruction. Novelty quickens toward an imagined climax, not unlike a countdown, but the true revelation lies in the pattern. Ideologies evolve in similar fashion. Initially meant as systems for studying ideas, they morph into prescriptive codes repeated until they feel inevitable. Through repetition, they mimic nature's own cycles—mutating, expanding, imploding. Each burst of novelty plants the next seed. In this churn, language shifts from a vehicle for meaning into a spectacle of transformation. Only a grasp of novelty's logic enables navigation through the whirl of modern discourse.

The conspiracy of speech is not an irreversible doom. Each loop in the cycle can be altered, slowed, or redirected. Conspiracy may become dialogue. Indoctrination may become reflection. Consensus may become collaboration. All hinges on the structure of language. When speech divides, collapse follows. When it dominates, failure ensues. But when treated as a shared tool for meaning-making—fragile, adaptable, and open—it becomes a force for relationship rather than rule. Speech is not simply a reflection of belief. It generates worlds. Its genealogies are society's architecture. Understanding the cycle allows the metaphor to be chosen carefully and the foundation to be restored. Clarity, rhythm, and repetition carry weight. Yet above all, meaning must remain central—not imposed meaning, but discovered, recovered, and exchanged. No doctrine lasts forever. Every linguistic system will face its reckoning. The genealogy of speech exposes not a flaw in language, but its deepest nature: the perpetual transformation of belief into structure, structure into control, control into breakdown, and breakdown into new belief. Language cannot escape the cycle—but it can reveal it. In that revelation lies the first trace of freedom. The genealogy of speech traces a linguistic cycle of recurring stupidity, where conspiracy breeds indoctrination, and consensus calcifies into dogma—only to collapse and begin again. Intelligence appears briefly, in moments of doubt or satire, but is soon swallowed by the machinery of repetition and belief. These fleeting awakenings rarely halt the cycle; at best, they illuminate its absurdity. Language, for all its promise, remains the stage on which folly endlessly performs.

Intelligence and Stupidity

Language is not merely a mirror of thought; it is the primary scaffolding upon which all human reasoning, coordination, and misjudgement is built. Intelligence and stupidity, far from being abstract or isolated traits, are linguistically structured modes of behaviour and perception. Every act of cognition is shaped, limited, or empowered by the words we use and the models they encode. This linguistic infrastructure forms not only the basis of knowledge and understanding but also of error, confusion, and destructive overconfidence. Intelligence, in this view, is not just the ability to learn or solve problems but to create and refine internal models of reality using language. These models allow agents—humans, animals, machines—to anticipate, simulate, and act meaningfully. Turing's imitation game, for instance, defined intelligence as the linguistic ability to convince an observer of one's humanity. Yet critics rightly pointed out that emotional nuance, historical awareness, and affective coherence also matter. Using structural coupling organisms develop meaning through dynamic linguistic and behavioural feedback with their environments. The intelligent use of language is not simply accurate or clever; it is responsive, adaptive, and continuously self-correcting. Stupidity, by contrast, is not merely the absence of intelligence. It is the systematic misuse of language and internal models to harm both self and others. Carlo Cipolla's famous test measures stupidity along two axes: harm or benefit to oneself, and harm or benefit to others. When individuals repeatedly act in ways that diminish both, they exhibit stupidity as a kind of recursive, self-perpetuating failure. It is not ignorance alone that defines this mode but a confident misuse of communicative patterns—rules, stories, slogans—that blind rather than clarify. When Cipolla's four types—intelligent, bandit, naïve, stupid—are extended to account for intention, a broader taxonomy emerges. Some individuals help others unintentionally while seeking personal gain; others cause harm to everyone without malice, simply through incompetence. This 'Social Wheel[24]' maps stupidity not as a binary but as a spectrum structured through language: from manipulative rhetoric to unreflective cliché, from dangerous overconfidence to wilful miscomprehension. Importantly, those classified as incapable often surpass the stupid in harm, precisely because their misuse of language and thought goes unrecognised and unchallenged.

This framework reveals a deeper educational imperative. Intelligence must be cultivated not through isolated content but through the training of linguistic habits: the constant revision of models, the capacity to name complexity without collapsing it into simplification, and the humility to question one's own understanding. Alan Sokal's parody hoax on postmodern academic language succeeded because it exposed how certain linguistic forms had become disconnected from coherent models of meaning—how entire communities could be persuaded by the tone of intelligence, even when content was absent. In both classrooms and boardrooms, the power to shape meaning resides in one's control over linguistic structure. Yet language's power cuts both ways. In 'Studying stupidity – the smart move? [25]' Anthony Montgomery reminds us that society does not treat stupidity with the same urgency as poverty or disease. No public institution sets out to eradicate stupidity, despite its foundational role in disasters such as Hillsborough, Grenfell, or the 2008 financial collapse. Why? Perhaps because stupidity implicates everyone. It thrives on mental shortcuts—heuristics, cognitive biases, and

[24] Mella, P. (2017). Intelligence and Stupidity —The Educational Power of Cipolla's Test and of the 'Social Wheel'. Creative Education, [online] 08(15), pp.2515–2534. doi:https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2017.815174.

[25] BPS. (2024). Studying stupidity – the smart move? [online] Available at: https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/studying-stupidity-smart-move [Accessed 19 May 2025].

groupthink—that turn language into a mask of reason rather than its expression. Psychology has devoted heroic effort to understanding intelligence, but this focus has overshadowed a more pervasive phenomenon. Perhaps we are simply too embarrassed to examine our collective folly. Reluctancy to look in the mirror? Across psychology, a common theme is our reliance on mental shortcuts—heuristics and biases—to navigate complexity. Daniel Kahneman's distinction between automatic and effortful thinking reveals how easily decision makers fool themselves into believing they are reasoning when they are merely reacting. Language used rapidly and intuitively can sound coherent without being rational. Group settings—whether corporations or governments—amplify this effect. Words become instruments of social coordination, not truth. Buzzwords, branding, and managerial jargon often produce what Mats Alvesson and André Spicer term 'functional stupidity' in their article[26] 'A Stupidity-Based Theory of Organisations'. A condition where organisations actively suppress critical thinking in favour of streamlined, unquestioned speech. Consultants and experts become agents of repetition rather than insight, pushing rule-based language systems that hinder rather than help decision-making. Some define stupidity as the application of rule systems where increased information makes outcomes worse. Unlike ignorance, stupidity is structured—linguistically encoded and reinforced. Its practitioners follow protocols, apply categories, and speak authoritatively, but their discourse leads further away from truth. Intelligence, on the other hand, operates with simpler, adaptive rules capable of grasping complexity without being engulfed by it. Intelligence speaks with clarity; stupidity with certainty.

Stupidity's most dangerous form is extremism. People with the strongest opinions on hot topics in the news often knew the least, while believing they knew the most. Their linguistic behaviour—assertive, confident, polarising—mirrored the Dunning-Kruger effect: the least competent overestimate their knowledge and express it with the most rhetorical force. This pattern is not accidental. Language, once disconnected from epistemic humility, becomes a weapon of false certainty. Philosophers, playwrights, and novelists have long diagnosed this. Bertrand Russell's 1933 essay 'The Triumph of Stupidity' blamed Adolf Hitler's rise on the 'organised fervour of stupid and brutal people', observing that 'the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt'. Moral posturing often prolongs problems rather than solving them. Drama, from ancient tragedy to modern political satire, reveals how words become complicit in atrocity when detached from reflection. Humanities disciplines—so often sidelined by scientific empiricism—retain the unique power to interrogate linguistic stupidity in its cultural forms. Stupidity, however, is not simply a failure of individual cognition. It is systemic. Universities critique the publishing industry while sustaining it through unpaid labour. Environmentalists argue for drastic change while continuing to fly. Policy circles discuss inequality while maintaining economic structures that reinforce it. These contradictions are not signs of hypocrisy alone, but of linguistic failure: slogans, policies, and theories repeat without producing corresponding action. Language becomes inert, circular, and performative.

What can be done? First of all stupidity must be admitted and accepted even among the academia and the high brows. The study of 'stupidology', far from being a satire, offers real promise. If language encodes error as easily as truth, then the discipline of intelligence must begin with rhetorical ethics. This includes recognising the traps of overused metaphors, unpacking the implied models in public discourse, and challenging the prestige of complexity for its own sake. Simplicity in speech, when combined with sincerity and openness to

[26] Alvesson, M. and Spicer, A. (2012). A Stupidity-Based Theory of Organizations. Journal of Management Studies, 49(7), pp.1194–1220. doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2012.01072.x.

correction, becomes a radical act. Language locks us into patterns of sense-making that often exclude nuance. But by learning to treat speech not as a window but as a model—a flexible, revisable map—we begin to unlearn the blind spots built into every ideology, slogan, or disciplinary dogma. Education becomes not the transmission of content but the transformation of habits: training speakers to recognise when a word has calcified into a cliché, when a concept masks more than it reveals, when confidence has outpaced comprehension. This linguistic awareness is the cornerstone of real intelligence. It is not an elitist property but a democratic skill, teachable and necessary. It demands that public institutions shift from reward systems based on performance to those based on reflection. That universities reward the questioner as much as the expert. Until intelligence is defined not merely by IQ or credentials, but by one's relationship to language—its flexibility, humility, and ethical use—stupidity will continue to dominate decision-making. The world will be ruled not by the ignorant, but by the overconfident. And systems will be governed not by insight, but by inertia. In the end, the boundary between intelligence and stupidity is not fixed. It is drawn and redrawn in speech. It lives in how people frame problems, accept or reject contradiction, and choose between repeating formulas or facing uncertainty. Intelligence is the art of knowing one might be wrong. Stupidity is the habit of speaking as though one never is.

The Value of Stupidity

The idea that 'feeling stupid' might be an advantage in scientific research took root in 2008, when Martin A. Schwartz, a professor of microbiology and biomedical engineering at the University of Virginia, published a brief yet resonant essay[27] 'The importance of stupidity in scientific research'. In it, Schwartz contended that facing one's ignorance is not just a side effect of research—it is the very condition for meaningful discovery. His insights came after a conversation with a former classmate who had left her Ph.D. program, not because she lacked intelligence, but because the daily experience of feeling lost eroded her confidence. Schwartz, initially surprised, soon realised that he too regularly felt 'stupid' in his work. Rather than resisting this discomfort, he began to interpret it as a marker of true inquiry. 'Productive stupidity', in Schwartz's view, means deliberately pursuing questions whose answers lie beyond current understanding. This conscious entry into the unknown, where failures are frequent and outcomes uncertain, is what drives genuine innovation. Unlike classroom success, which rewards accuracy and recall, research demands resilience in the face of confusion and error. Schwartz proposed that graduate education must help future scientists become comfortable with this shift—from mastering known material to confronting what no one yet understands. Encouraging this intellectual humility could reorient the culture of science around exploration rather than achievement. This insight transcends the laboratory. In every discipline, the real work begins where knowledge ends. Einstein himself emphasised the importance of posing questions more than finding answers. Cultivating environments that welcome uncertainty and foster curiosity over certainty is a prerequisite for progress. In this light, the feeling of stupidity is not a failure but the engine of creativity. The refusal to ask tough questions, to challenge what is accepted, is the only true stupidity.

James F. Welles, in his 1987 book 'Understanding Stupidity', approached the subject from a broader theoretical perspective. His work proposes that stupidity is not simply a product of individual failure but is embedded within behaviour, biology, and culture. Drawing from

[27] Schwartz, M.A. (2008). The importance of stupidity in scientific research. Journal of Cell Science, 121(11), pp.1771–1771. doi:https://doi.org/10.1242/jcs.033340.

behaviourism, Welles pointed out that human actions are constrained by learning patterns and prior causes. In this view, stupidity is not a moral lapse, but an organic failure that arises when cognitive and environmental limitations intersect. Yet beyond biology, cultural systems often reinforce what Welles called the 'neurotic paradox'. This is a feedback loop wherein collective norms amplify maladaptive behaviours to the point of dysfunction. Group loyalty, language conventions, and pressure to conform can push behaviour far from what would serve individual or group survival. In such contexts, actions become 'stupid' not merely because they fail, but because they undermine the very standards and values the group claims to uphold. Welles defined stupidity as behaviour that betrays the expectations of one's own reference group—whether by distorting perception, abandoning social balance, or justifying actions through delusion. Stupidity is not every mistake; it is the kind of mistake that repeats itself through self-deception and denial, long after its cost becomes evident. This kind of stupidity is sustained not by ignorance alone, but by power, justification, and institutional inertia. Even as the world accumulates knowledge at an unprecedented rate, it does not follow that wisdom increases proportionally. Our systems, Welles warned, teach how to act but not how to reflect on those actions. Education imparts skills without critical self-awareness. Science produces data without addressing fundamental moral failures. In this sense, stupidity is not just a failure to know—it is a failure to rethink.

A deeper awareness of stupidity's structures thus creates a moral imperative. If stupidity results from systemic loops and cultural blindness, then understanding these mechanisms obligates individuals and institutions to intervene. The past is full of errors that could have been avoided; studying them is a way of minimising future harm. A society that learns only how to accumulate knowledge, without learning how to use it, risks repeating its worst mistakes. This call to reason must include reflection on how science itself enacts and perpetuates stupidity. Stupidity, after all, is not simply ignorance but false certainty. It is not the absence of facts but the inability to use them wisely. A system that praises speed over depth, formatting over originality, or prestige over truth invites institutional stupidity. When language becomes a shield rather than a window, and jargon replaces clarity, scientific discourse fails its purpose. So, who studies stupidity? The field spans disciplines. Psychologists investigate cognitive biases and misjudgements. Sociologists look at the group dynamics that foster collective error. Linguists examine how meaning gets distorted by euphemism, repetition, and overcomplication. In recent decades, interdisciplinary fields like behavioural economics and the science of science (SciSci) have begun mapping how intelligent people and systems still make irrational, even catastrophic, decisions. Language plays a significant role. On the surface, studying stupidity through language analysis may seem contradictory. But language is the primary mechanism through which humans misunderstand and mislead. Scholars of discourse and pragmatics reveal how linguistic conventions can create and obscure meaning. Samuel Beckett once referred to 'stale words' that bury the truth. The critique of 'word-superstition'—belief in the authority of meaningless phrases—is a way of diagnosing initial stages of collective delusion. Studying linguistic stupidity is therefore not itself absurd, but essential for understanding how error spreads.

The psychology of group behaviour adds another layer. Irving Janis's model of groupthink demonstrates how tightly-knit groups suppress dissent, prioritise unanimity, and stumble into disastrous decisions—from political miscalculations to scientific frauds. Deindividuation research shows how people in large collectives lose personal restraint and act in ways they never would alone. The stupidity here is not individual, but systemic—a failure rooted in context, communication, and pressure to conform. This failure extends to how language functions as a tool of control. Originally, language evolved to bind people together in

shared purpose. It was the glue of community and cooperation. But in mass societies, it is often used to deceive, rally, and manipulate. Political slogans, marketing campaigns, and social media echo chambers compress complex ideas into catchphrases designed to trigger obedience, not thought. What once enabled communion now enables conformity. As such, stupidity in language is not a passive accident—it is a design feature of mass manipulation. No single discipline can exhaustively explain stupidity. Linguistic analysis shows how words decay. Psychology reveals how judgment collapses. Neuroscience identifies how the brain's architecture can mislead itself. These approaches together provide tools for counteracting stupidity—teaching media literacy, designing deliberative systems that preserve dissent, and fostering environments where ignorance can be acknowledged rather than hidden. The study of stupidity is not cynical. It is, in fact, a hopeful enterprise. By tracing the steps that lead to bad decisions, we can prevent repetition. By recognising the limits of our intelligence, we can structure institutions more wisely. The effort may seem paradoxical—using intelligence to study stupidity—but it is this recursive self-awareness that constitutes wisdom.

The pursuit of this wisdom requires a commitment to meta-reflection. A science that examines how science fails. An education that includes not just facts but the limits of knowing. A political culture that values dissent. A linguistic style that prefers clarity over performance. Above all, it demands the courage to admit what we do not know and to treat that admission not as a flaw, but as a foundation. The embrace of productive stupidity is therefore not a resignation, but a challenge. It asks for humility, patience, and critical imagination. In research, it encourages stepping into the void without guarantees. In society, it calls for systems that reward questions, not just answers. In language, it urges simplicity without reducing complexity. And in ourselves, it demands that we tolerate uncertainty without giving up the pursuit of truth. Stupidity is not a failure of intellect but a failure of humility—a refusal to engage uncertainty honestly. Science, education, and culture have all, at times, repeated the very errors they were built to transcend, accumulating meaningless stories and sterile jargon in place of understanding. Like religions before it, science risks becoming a faith in process over purpose. Its salvation lies not in more data, but in more doubt. By institutionalising the value of productive stupidity—admitting ignorance, resisting conformity, and honouring curiosity—we renew the spirit of inquiry and open the way to wisdom.

Stupidity in Science

Emilio Gómez-Milan's essay[28] 'Stupidity in Science' highlights how it operates not only in individuals but as a structural condition within science itself. Institutions and cultures can display what might be called *automatic stupidity*: scientific systems that ignore their own ignorance and lack the critical self-reflection essential for genuine advancement. To correct this, science needs sustained meta-analysis (a 'science of science'), slow-science practices, revamped peer review systems, nuanced statistics for varied individuals, ethical resistance to 'neuromania', and transparent public communication. Above all, science must return to curiosity-driven research, intrinsic motivation, and an authentic love of knowledge. Science today resembles a conveyor belt of fragmented papers rather than the 'consciousness of the world' it could become. The traditional boundaries between mind and matter, data and metaphor, have collapsed—but the discipline has divided its focus so finely that it often loses sight of method and meaning. Both macro theories and micro data are necessary, and this calls

[28] Gómez-Milan, E. (2021). Stupidity in Science. Stupidity in Science. [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348976931_Stupidity_in_Science.

for reclaiming meta-science—not just philosophy but empirical study of scientific practice. Science promotes authority and rejection: over 90 percent of papers are rejected by peer review. Yet authority is claimed confidently in fields like consciousness or cosmology while ignorance remains effectively limitless. Humility should be the bedrock of science; instead, arrogance is common. Successful science should generate questions first, papers second, and cultivate systems that favour innovation over conformity. Peer review often masks itself as mind-reading rather than critical evaluation. Reviewers demand high output and citations, while measures of creativity and merit remain crude. Intelligence in science should mean analysing the system itself—peer review, funding flows, publication pressures—based on evidence rather than tradition.

Scientific truth is provisional. Controlled trials and lab models are managed contexts; real life is messy. Vaccines save lives, but not all laboratory insights translate into the world. Acknowledging uncertainty, resisting scientism, and recognising the interpretive role of humanity are essential. Science operates under tension between speed and depth. Darwin's evolutionary theories evolved through slow reflection, but today's publish-or-perish culture rewards rapid output. Restoring depth is urgent. Peer review thrives on rejection and breeds envy. Reviewers often uphold formatting and literature-checking over novel ideas. A better system would combine permissiveness with critical rigor—but only if it also undergoes transparent self-assessment. Grant allocation should shift from meeting CV milestones to judging ideas on their own merits. Publicly available proposals and open review could democratise funding, breaking cycles where prior prestige predicts future success. Group-level statistics dominate science, but application to individuals requires understanding distribution and variance. Clinical or practical significance cannot be reduced to p-values. Frameworks that link group results to individual cases are vital. Citation counts drive conformity and discourage novelty. Their prominence undermines intrinsic motivation and intellectual risk-taking. Exploring alternative quality metrics, or reducing reliance on citations, may infuse more courage into discovery. Endless guidelines—on ethics, formatting, reporting—create compliance rather than creativity. While safeguards matter, bureaucratic excesses can suffocate intellectual freedom. The challenge lies in distinguishing regulation that protects from that which merely enforces uniformity. Behind metrics and gatekeeping is a simple failure: science has lost sight of curiosity. Rebels—those who challenge norms—are needed now more than ever, along with a reclamation of science as a human, humble, intrinsically motivated activity. Science must rediscover its humility. Valuing slow, creative inquiry alongside rapid publication, subjecting its own practices to scrutiny, and acknowledging deep ignorance can break the cycles of institutional stupidity and restore the promise of a discipline grounded in wonder.

In 'The importance of stupidity in scientific research' Martin A. Schwartz emphasises the value of personal confrontation with stupidity. His anecdote about a friend quitting a PhD program because her research made her feel stupid reveals the difference between schooling and scientific inquiry. Success in science means framing novel questions, designing experiments for unknowns, and navigating failure. When Nobel laureate Henry Taube admitted ignorance, he modelled a healthier form of intelligence—embracing productive stupidity to ignite discovery. Acknowledging boundless ignorance can be liberating. Research is hard. No policy or institutional reform can trivialise that fact. Graduate programs rarely teach gratitude for stupidity. Instead, oral exams could reward admissions of ignorance, showing readiness for genuine inquiry. Productive stupidity is deliberate—embracing uncertainty while venturing into the unknown. Each failure, when learnt from, moves understanding forward. Discomfort with not knowing becomes the gateway to deeper insight. Science demands that feeling of stupidity

not be feared but fostered. Progress comes from asking unanswerable questions, persisting amid setbacks, and valuing failure's lessons. Linguistically, stupidity and intelligence manifest in the speeches of scientists and how institutions structure discourse. Language shapes thought, institutions, and research habits. Stupidity in science often emerges as certainty divorced from nuance, clarity replaced by jargon, and rules that inhibit imagination. Academic language can become performative: buzzwords, branding, and jargon turn science into corporate messaging rather than inquiry. The result is 'functional stupidity', where questioning and complexity are suppressed in the name of consensus or strategy.

Stupidity's worst offenses occur when rules and indicators mask incompetence. Following protocols blindly—ethics checklists, logos of certification—without thinking, can produce harm. The media frenzy around issues like mental health or genetic breakthroughs often reveals a faith in authority rather than evidence. The study of stupidity—'stupidology', is urgently needed. Stupidity is not a gap in knowledge but an overconfidence in rules and systems where more data worsens decision-making. Intelligence, instead, favours adaptability, simplicity, and context. Stupidity in science thrives in extremes: politically motivated scholarship, over-reliance on convenience sampling, or fashionable but shallow theory. Dunning–Kruger effects are common even among the well-educated: extreme opinions on biotech or AI often correlate with shallow understanding and misplaced confidence. Rejecting complexity for complexity's sake, or hiding behind obscure math and overstated conclusions, are linguistic signs of scientific failure, not subtlety. The humanities offer a corrective. Dramatic works about scientific hubris—whether Hawking forsaking doubt or Eichmann performing evil under bureaucratic framing—show how language structures moral and epistemic failure. Historical sociology, narrative, philosophy—all illuminate the conditions under which stupidity takes hold.

Science needs reflection on its own discourse. Words form the boundaries of what can be thought, questioned, or imagined. When language becomes rigid—equations, acronyms, technical terms that function as code—it obstructs rather than enables knowledge. The final turn toward humility lies in reclaiming language. Simpler discourse, open uncertainty, frank admissions of ignorance—these are not rhetorical devices but vital instruments of real intelligence. Resetting language can dismantle systemic stupidity. Science aspires to insight, but it can degenerate through institutionalised error. Science aspires to discovery, but it can be reduced to conformity. Yet nothing in the essence of scientific method demands that failure. By confronting stupidity, reviving wonder, and making humility structural rather than rhetorical, the discipline can fulfill its promise. In the end, stupidity in science is an institutional phenomenon as much as a personal one—rooted in how language governs norms, grants authority, and suppresses uncertainty. The ambition to remedy it lies not in slogans or metrics but in transforming discourse: rewarding questions, valuing failure, embracing ignorance, and admitting, with humility, what remains unknown. Stupidity in science is a failure of collective imagination. Intelligence will follow when systems honour inquiry over output, depth over speed, and curiosity over convention.

Science must learn humility in facing its own stupidity. Like the dogmas of past religions and knowledge systems, it risks producing massive volumes of data, jargon, and theory that collapse. Without self-criticism, it repeats old errors—replacing sacred texts with peer-reviewed emptiness. As science evolves into a new secular faith, it must accept its fate: not as the master of truth, but as a flawed yet hopeful language of seeking, not knowing.

Profound indoctrination

'It's indoctrination so profound that educated people can't even understand the question that I just raised. Try it with journalists. Ask them: can there be journalism on the Iraq war that can be something different from the college newspaper cheering for the home team'.

- Noam Chomsky, (No One's Listening, December 7, 2005)

Noam Chomsky's remark during his 2005 interview with Irene—'Education can make you more thoroughly indoctrinated'—cuts to the core of a hidden danger within schooling. It suggests that advanced study does not guarantee intellectual freedom; on the contrary, it often reinforces unspoken limits on thought, shaping the consciousness of individuals so deeply that they take the dominant narrative as neutral fact. This indoctrination is not imposed by decree but is woven into the fabric of education, media, and institutional culture, making it both profound and invisible. Chomsky's claim—that even well-informed journalists may be incapable of questioning core assumptions—emerges in critique of every war coverage since. When the challenges is to break from 'cheering for the home team', it reveals how narrow public opinion becomes once the boundaries of acceptable discourse are internalised. In this dynamic, entire professions become echo chambers, repeating received truths under the illusion of objectivity. In the mid-nineteenth century, newspapers in England and the U.S. were remarkably open and diverse. As ownership centralised and advertising replaced reader revenue, news became shaped by profit, not public service. Editors carved a 'news hole' only after selling ad space; TV networks financed content through commercials, and PR firms began to produce news-ready video segments disguised as independent journalism. The effect: manufactured consent under the veneer of choice. This model persists today. Modern political campaigns borrow heavily from consumer advertising. They spotlight image over substance—optics over policy—and emotional resonance over intellectual clarity. As a result, surveys consistently show that only a tiny fraction of voters can articulate candidates' real positions. Media now feels like a masquerade—complete with rehearsed gestures and scripted lines—where education becomes a tool to internalise this hollow spectacle.

Not surprisingly, the most indoctrinated groups are often the best educated. They genuinely believe they are objective, unaware of the assumptions they carry. This because of hidden taboos embedded in elite education—phrases that cannot be uttered, ideas that cannot be questioned, debates that must be avoided. The original introduction to 'Animal Farm', where Orwell criticised British elites, was suppressed to avoid offending the same class. That omission exemplifies how admission of worldview assumptions is considered too dangerous. Scholars trained to think critically outside these boundaries risk professional ostracism. Indoctrination becomes second nature once those boundaries are internalised. Gatekeepers—editors, academic panels, professional bodies—act as implicit censors. Dissent is quietly discouraged. The result: a seamless continuity between corporate narrators and institutional voices. Even advocates for the marginalised become captive to the basic framework—the terms of discourse shift, but not the foundational assumptions. Such systemic indoctrination leaves room for genuine public sentiment to exist unreported. Citizens could favour more social spending, environmental protection, and equitable distribution—but those views may go unacknowledged by mainstream media. A latent majority exists, yet remains disenfranchised, unheard, and out of the linguistic frame. The remedy lies in reviving authentic press not beholden to commercial interests. Public or subscription funding, agents of accountability, and editorial courage can restore a genuinely open marketplace of ideas. The Internet promises to break this cycle—citizen journalism, peer-to-peer sharing, unfiltered eyewitness accounts, and grassroots data have already reshaped how information flows. Corporations and governments attempt to co-opt digital platforms, yet their

openness still allows alternative narratives to surface, and ripe spaces of political energy to emerge.

At the heart of Chomsky's critique lies the paradox: knowledge systems built to empower can instead narrow imagination. Elites emerge confident, objective, even righteous—yet harbour conceptual blinders preventing them from questioning the premises of state and corporate power. Journalism and scholarship become ministries of legitimation rather than engines of critique. Indoctrination, then, is not limited to formal schooling—it extends through informal channels: public relations, think tanks, social norms, and subtle biases within professional cultures. From catechism schools to what passes for higher learning today, teaching becomes less about awakening minds and more about conditioning acceptance. This applies beyond politics. Religious indoctrination operates similarly: elevation of sacred texts as unquestioned truth, rites rehearsed until they obscure moral agency, taboos enforced by group loyalty. Secular ideologies function in the same way: whether nationalist, technocratic, or bureaucratic, they cultivate intellectual habits anchored in assumptions never examined. False neutrality thrives at the top. If only 10 percent of voters understand policy beyond sound bites, the rest remain spectators—passive consumers of image-based persuasion. Media's sedative effect dulls critical engagement, and education seldom fixes it. Paradoxically, higher education often equips people to rationalise—even celebrate—deeper ignorance. Undermining this requires both intellectual literacy and collective renewal. Digital networks make possible distributed critique through blogs, podcasts, alternatives to mainstream outlets. But digital infrastructure also requires organising—political associations, unions, civic networks—to translate awareness into power. Individuals must connect their discontent to democratic structures. A free press demands structural separation from commercial and state interests. Journalists must be protected from domination—through independent funding, legal corporation rules, nonprofit models. Investigative reporting should be valued not for clicks but for accountability. Citizens must demand curiosity rather than edited partisan spectacle.

Even if education reforms promise critical thinking and debate, they cannot dismantle the deeper structure of indoctrination, because the very language used to teach and report reality is already saturated with ideological bias. Attempts to shift pedagogy—toward curiosity, discussion, or epistemic humility—still operate within a medium that frames meaning through pre-loaded terms, binary choices, and ritualised expressions. The propaganda model of media does not simply distort content; it thrives on a form of language that renders dissent unintelligible or absurd before it even begins. Generative thinking, critical pedagogy, and safe spaces may appear to offer resistance, but they often reproduce the same linguistic habits: slogans replacing reflection, permissible critique replacing radical doubt, and reformist vocabularies obscuring foundational contradictions. Even the rhetoric of reform depends on institutionalised phrases, borrowed from bureaucratic or corporate templates. In this context, educated individuals do not escape indoctrination—they refine it, learning to speak fluently within the boundaries of what can be said. The more eloquent they become, the more deeply they embed the illusion of objectivity. This is not a rejection of intellectual life but a recognition that intellectualism itself is shaped by linguistic framing. Even access to documents, funding trails, or internal memos cannot guarantee transparency if the very act of interpretation remains imprisoned in the dominant discourse. Civic engagement, watchdogs, and grassroots journalism may slow the machinery, but the machinery still speaks in the grammar of control.

Indoctrination is not enforced from above but enacted through language itself. Doctrines become habits of thought, ideologies become sentence structure, and what cannot be said disappears from possibility. Reform becomes performance, and education a system of fluent compliance. Awareness of this cycle is not liberation—but it is a beginning. When individuals

question not only what is taught but how it is spoken—when they distrust even the terms of their own critique—they begin to tear open the veil. In a society built on manufactured truths, the only real education is linguistic rebellion. Not against knowledge, but against the form that knowledge takes when shaped by power. The goal is not to tell better stories within the existing grammar, but to rupture the grammar itself—to speak where silence is imposed, to listen for what dominant language conceals, and to doubt the clarity of every fluent answer. Profound indoctrination is not an accident but the goal of education. Every education system, however modern or secular, relies on repetition—of slogans, formulas, and pre-approved truths—echoed like mantras, memorised like scripture. Whether in classrooms or newsrooms, words become tools of reflex, not reflection—delivered like punches in a boxing match, automatic and unexamined. Language drills obedience into thought, making conformity feel like understanding. In this cycle, true thinking begins only when language is disrupted—when the chant is broken and the mind, briefly, forgets the next line.

Pathology of institutions

Alan G. Gross[29], examining Habermas's critique of 'Systematically Distorted Communication', highlights how institutions warp shared discourse into closed, rationalised systems that push individuals toward conformity rather than genuine dialogue. Jürgen Habermas warns that 'The same configurations that drive the individual to neurosis, move society to establish institutions'. These dense institutional configurations—legal systems, healthcare administrations, universities, corporate behemoths—dominate individual thought and soften the boundaries between reason and madness by weaponising specialised jargon and scripted discourse. Every institution today functions as a linguistic ecosystem twisted into pathology—its own language evolving into a force of indoctrination, collective neurosis, and systemic stupidity. The institutionalised linguistic structure works as a shared form of madness—where each administration or power bloc crafts its own jargon and enforces the ruling ideas of its dominant class. Words themselves become instruments of control, demanding ever-tighter guidance to ensure they serve institutional ends rather than human understanding. Social and political institutions become pathological when they mimic the compulsive rigidity found in neurotic behaviour—mechanically repeating actions without regard for actual needs or conditions. Just as a neurotic individual acts out patterns disconnected from reality, an economy may produce goods endlessly, indifferent to whether people want or can afford them. These institutional behaviours reflect entrenched belief systems that mirror psychological disorders, but on a collective scale. Unlike individual distortions, the communication these institutions generate is systematically distorted and widely shared across entire social groups or even whole societies. In their quest for authority, institutions craft hermetic vocabularies: policy wonks defend the indefensible with bureaucratic elocution; legalese styles every act into an impersonal ritual; marketing spin recasts facts into marketable narratives. These are not innocuous technical tools; they are 'shared madness', designed to freeze debate, compress nuance, and embed control. Once this lexicon spreads through every document—emails, memos, strategic plans—it accumulates power. Each new digression enshrines the prior, and soon no one speaks simply. Even dissent becomes a version of jargon.

[29] Gross, A.G. (2010). Systematically Distorted Communication: An Impediment to Social and Political Change. Informal Logic, 30(4). doi:https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v30i4.1188.

Let us consider linguistic communication in medicine. In an ideal, humane clinic, the doctor engages the patient in listening and reflection. Words arrive with empathy, open to nuance, and genuine inquiry. In institutional medicine, by contrast, the doctor merely prescribes, reducing communication into empty protocol. Dialogue is silenced under forms and checklists; the patient becomes a case number. Defined by insistent institutional language, the 'doctor' enforces order and obedience, not health. Patients learn to echo prefabricated terms—symptoms, risk factors, compliance—rather than express lived experience. This dynamic scales up across society. In ancient Greece, there were two distinct types of doctors: one for free citizens and one for slaves. The physician treating free citizens was expected to explain the diagnosis and proposed treatment, gaining the patient's understanding, cooperation, and consent. In contrast, the doctor for slaves provided care without any explanation, acting directly and unquestioningly—treating the patient more like an animal than a human, with no dialogue, just commands and procedures imposed from above. In a world of voluntary 'slavery', institutions foist preaching, directives, and slogans that train behaviour at scale. Doctrines recede into obedience. Individuals become cogs. Consent is no longer symphonic but tasked and tracked. Genuine agreement is impossible in sterile hallways littered with memos and keywords. By contrast, the truth-teller stands in revolt against institutional pathology. Their authority is not derived from official sanction but from conviction. To sway hearts and minds, the truth-teller accepts suffering, channels emotion, and enacts authenticity—not by parroting slogans but by speaking with integrity and risking consequences. This space of open discourse rejects safe language. All means are permitted—argument, metaphor, even poetry—but never structural evasion or sloganistic hypocrisy. Institutions ossify when they recycle their own language into gospel. The rules become rituals, the rituals become rites, and the rites become dogma. 'Patient-centred care' becomes a phrase nobody questions. 'Evidence-based' becomes shorthand for pre-approved conclusions. 'Safety culture' replicates itself. In such systems, even dissent within becomes a form of pathology—the dissenting voice must use the same coded language or risk expulsion. The crisis intensifies when institutional language becomes a fortress, where words are guarded and only the initiated are granted access. A label must be used precisely as intended—not discovered, not questioned. Pedagogy becomes indoctrination. Public discourse becomes paralyzed. In universities, education reforms—bringing in critical pedagogy, debate, and epistemic humility—are sabotaged by institutional habit: writing centres recast critique as alignment with mission statements; faculty meetings become echo chambers of mission jargon. The instruments of transformation are dulled by language that traps itself.

The mass media system exemplifies this pathology. In Orwell's suppressed introduction to 'Animal Farm', he describes how corporate press owners, fearful of offending powerful interests, preemptively suppress dissent—not by law, but through unspoken consensus. That voluntary censorship is invisible, yet far more potent than any decree. The language of news—sound bites, headlines, lead paragraphs pulled like props—morphs into entertainment and moral signalling, not information. Editorial 'news holes' are carved only around blocks of ads. Viewers, immersed in phrases like 'breaking' or 'exclusive', learn not to ask why, only to react. These institutions—hospitals, schools, courts, media outlets—exhibit shared symptoms: proliferation of platitude; demonisation of nuance; sanctification of jargon; cults of repetition. People within begin to mimic the language reflexively: memos and reports filled with passive voice, empty nouns, and inflated verbs. Staff meetings reward the repetition of management-specified keywords. Strategic plans advertise 'synergy' and 'alignment'. New employees learn the language not to speak, but to survive. Such environments produce neurosis—individuals who feel anxious when left to speak without scripted prompts, who fear being unscripted more than being wrong. Systemic stupidity is a collective phenomenon. Institutions create 'functional

stupidity', where clarity is punished and ambiguity rewarded, where trained intelligence is sidelined in favour of linguistic conformity. Hierarchies extract compliance. Productivity is measured in slogan use, not problem-solving. Training becomes indoctrination. Expertise is signalled through layers of specialisation, not genuine understanding. Within this pathology, critical feedback becomes an act of heresy. Those who question the framework are labeled 'difficult' or even attacked as threats to 'organisational culture'. When words are detached from human meaning, institutional discourse becomes life-draining. Meetings replace action. Reports replace care. Key Performance Indicators replace wisdom. Facts are reified into deliverables, and projects become bureaucratic rituals. Transparency collapses as language substitutes for illumination.

If institutions are pathological, how can recovery begin? First, by acknowledging that the language itself is the pathology. It is not enough to reform content; the code must be reheard. Simplify. Encourage plain speech. Replace passive obfuscation with active attribution. Ask not 'how many', but 'why'. Allow silence. Pay attention when jargon becomes a substitute for responsibility. Second, revive the truth-teller. Give space to voices that speak with conviction, not credentials. Allow stories that contain doubt and discomfort. Support journalist-investigators who dig through records, not tweets. Third, resuscitate civil discourse. Habermas's public sphere requires rational-critical debate immune to structured ideological capture. Fourth, decentralise language use. Encourage translation across roles: have administrators write memos in everyday terms; have front-line workers redefine goals; have students write policy briefs; have patients evaluate guidelines. When multiple voices filter through institutional texts, linguistic rigidity begins to crack. Finally, embrace ongoing institutional critique. Allow institutions to generate unpredictability. Give those metrics weight. Reward failure that reveals structural flaws more than success that conceals them.

When institutions reclaim language as a tool for shared care and curiosity, not scripted control, they can emerge from pathology. Dialogue returns. People feel both heard and thinking. Language becomes human again. Institutions then approach their potential—to serve exploration, not replicating their own illusions. But without confronting the role of institutional language, no reform can last. Policies change, typesets update, but if the words we choose still constrict thought and smother dissent, the pathology remains. Truthfulness becomes optional; scripts resume. Organisational neuroticism returns in new forms. Institutional language demands obedience modelled as coherence, and conformity hidden as consensus. To resist that, the prescription is simple but profound: revive unmediated discourse, let words breathe, insist on authenticity, allow language to fracture, and reform beyond institutional rehearsals. Institutional health depends not on better slogans, but on greater openness. The pathology ends when language is returned—not as an instrument of rule, but as a medium of dialogue.

Chimera of language

'Language is the only chimera whose illusory power is endless, the inexhaustibility which keeps life from being impoverished. Let men learn to serve language'. — Karl Kraus

In his article[30] 'The Chimera of Language? Karl Kraus and Ludwig Wittgenstein', António Sousa Ribeiro explores how Kraus's vision of language shaped not only early twentieth-century discourse criticism but also informed the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. For Kraus,

[30] Ribeiro, A.S. (2013). The Chimera of Language? Karl Kraus and Ludwig Wittgenstein. De Gruyter eBooks, pp.373–388. doi:https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110294699.373.

language is not merely a tool to be used but a living entity that must be served. It possesses a power both dangerous and redemptive, a force that can deceive masses through propaganda or awaken the individual through poetic clarity. His lifelong project was to cleanse language from the empty automatism of slogans, from the rot of euphemism, from the collapse of meaning under bureaucratic or journalistic repetition. From the first issue of Die Fackel in 1899, Kraus undertook a meticulous dissection of the language of public life—especially the daily press. He aimed to drain what he called 'the swamp of commonplaces', exposing the erosion of meaning behind the ornate verbosity and empty certitudes of journalism and politics. For him, language was never an innocent instrument but a stage where ethics, truth, and power collided. It was not enough to criticise ideas; one had to examine the language through which those ideas were presented and performed. And the role of the writer was not that of a wordsmith who commands language, but of a servant who listens and responds to its demands with care and humility. This view resonates deeply with Wittgenstein, who would later argue in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus that philosophy consists of clarifying propositions so that their logical form becomes visible. Wittgenstein's famous assertion that 'all philosophy is a critique of language' aligns with Kraus's ethical and stylistic vigilance. For both thinkers, the task of criticism is neither to destroy language nor to claim mastery over it, but to refine it, to make it capable once more of disclosing the world rather than concealing it. Central to Kraus's ethics of language is the concept of fantasy—not fantasy in the sense of escapism or delusion, but a disciplined imaginative engagement with words. Fantasy is a social and historical force. An ability to use language in a way that awakens new possibilities, that restores to expression a sense of risk and authenticity. It is through fantasy that language escapes cliché and begins to shape reality. Kraus's wartime writings trace the consequences of a press that no longer communicates but manufactures perception. The result is not simply disinformation, but a general anaesthesia—an inability to perceive suffering, injustice, or individuality. Language becomes a system of deflection, where euphemism replaces fact, and ritualised expressions serve to validate violence.

When the Lumière brothers projected 'The Sprinkler Sprinkled' in 1895, audiences were astonished by the simple sight of leaves trembling in real time. This astonishment was not just about motion—it marked the emergence of a new perceptual regime, one in which illusion gained the authority of presence. Within decades, cinema had evolved into a sophisticated system of artifice. The painted reality of 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari' gave rise to an aesthetic that blurred the line between seen and imagined. What was created was not a language, but a fantasy world—pseudo-realism in its purest form. This convergence of fiction and fact is not a trivial phenomenon of media but a defining aspect of modern life. Paradoxically the technology of modernity revived magic. As Adorno noted, audiences consent to illusions knowingly. They participate in what might be called a role-entry contract: they suspend their disbelief not out of naivety but from a deeper desire to belong to a shared illusion. Genres provide the framework. Through repetition, trope, and formula, individuals become part of a unified 'we'. They are not misled so much as drawn into consensus by narrative rhythm. Film and media do not merely entertain; they synchronise the emotions of a fragmented public. The deeper concern arises when this synchronisation is no longer voluntary when illusion becomes environment. When democracy itself increasingly depends on staged and scripted communication. Political language adopts the genres of entertainment, and media becomes not merely a channel for information but a tool of governance. Nudges, visual cues, rehearsed performances—these replace deliberation. In this trajectory, media language evolves toward neurochemical compliance to ensure that citizens not only watch but feel the proper way.

This is the chimera of language—its power not to mirror truth but to construct realities so immersive that alternatives vanish. And the illusion is not in the content alone but in the repetition, the genre, the choreography of expression. Public language becomes performance. Journalism, advertising, even education become extensions of a scripted world, where meaning is drained by familiarity. The real threat is not that language lies but that it anesthetises. Euphemism does not falsify—it dulls. Cliché does not misrepresent—it numbs. Language does not need to deceive to be dangerous; it only needs to become automatic. The tragedy is not miscommunication, but desensitisation. Words are spoken, heard, repeated—but no longer felt. The audience is not fooled; it is sedated. This condition cannot be addressed by purification. It calls for confrontation. The act of critique becomes a kind of surgery: isolating infected phrases, exposing ornamental vacuity, and returning to a painful literalness. The language is forced to account for itself—not in terms of logic, but in terms of moral presence. What matters is not whether words are true in a scientific sense, but whether they awaken or conceal, whether they foster awareness or prevent it. Fantasy plays a decisive role here. Not fantasy as delusion, but as disciplined imagination. When cultivated, it allows language to escape automation, to become once again an ethical force. The philosopher and the poet both seek this: a speech that does not collapse into formula but opens space for thought. The task is not to deny meaning, but to preserve its fragility. Public language in times of crisis reveals its chimera most clearly. Bureaucratic speech replaces justice with policy. Wartime rhetoric replaces grief with honour. Euphemism becomes anaesthesia. The audience is not asked to agree, only to submit. The response must be stylistic as well as philosophical. It must challenge the aesthetic of certainty. Satire becomes not mockery but rescue. By revealing the mechanics of performance, critique breaks the spell of genre.

Language does not merely report; it stages. And so, the ethical burden lies in form. Clarity, silence, rhythm—these are not decorations but decisions. When language recognises its limits, it allows the listener to enter. When it ignores those limits, it becomes violence. The struggle is not for precision alone, but for care—for the reintroduction of difficulty, ambiguity, and responsiveness into the domain of speech. The philosopher's book does not end discourse but redirects it. Propositions become not conclusions but thresholds. Their power is not in asserting truth but in showing the structure of meaning. They do not describe the world; they allow it to appear. In this light, even the most rigorous texts are literary. Their value lies not in their claims but in their resonance, in the ways they shift attention. Language does not belong to science. It belongs to the humanities because it is not reducible to data. It is a site of relation, not calculation. It moves through echo and gesture, through contradiction and repetition. Its power is not to contain reality but to offer access to it. The chimera of language is not an error to be corrected but a condition to be embraced. Its illusions are not always deceits; they can be revelations. But only if they are not allowed to become habitual. When illusion becomes structure, when speech hardens into slogan, critique becomes our only tool of recovery. Serving language means surrendering mastery. It means becoming its caretaker, not its owner. The critic listens for what resists saying. The writer attends to what trembles beneath the sentence. Language must be handled as one handles fire—capable of warmth or destruction, never inert. Its chimera is both danger and gift. When you learn to serve it, do not banish illusion; just learn how to live truthfully among its shadows.

Unverifiable words

Words cannot be proved or confirmed finally; they evade verification, remaining forever open to dispute, refutation, or outright fabrication. They exist equally in myth, allegory, and cliché as in invention and fancy. Though every utterance may feel weighty, its claim often slips

away under scrutiny, leaving only the echo of our imagination. Think of the ancient babble from which the very idea of language emerged—a babble-tower built from idle chatter. The Latin 'babulus' and Greek 'barbaros' labeled speakers whose tongues were not understood as mere mockery; they were outsiders. Yet even in that confusion, the drive was clear: to claim identity by stamp, accent, accentuation. Words became markers—flags planted in thought. But whose lineage did the seed of meaning belong to? Biblical typology warns that every slogan, every worn-out phrase, so often locks us into a prescribed role: a porn cliché, a punk protest, a parody done so often it ceases to parody. Why speak at all? What use does every message have beyond feeding the habits of its audience—and the speaker's own inertia? A brand of 'scientific babble' parades as expertise while students nod politely—too afraid to admit confusion—and power slips into untested tongues. Words get their energy from the act of speaking, not from truth. Their authority arises not from verification, but from repetition and reinforcement by those too invested to question. Yet perhaps the collapse of dominant meaning is also its liberation. The story of Babel—where tongues fractured global power—reveals that no single language can rule all. In that rupture lies the potential to dismantle monolithic speech and embrace the unverifiable in each voice. The failure of shared vocabulary is not tragedy but possibility: a chance for each word to emerge unclaimed, unpinned to any ultimate authority. In that silence between syllables, genuine meaning breathes.

When no single origin unilaterally dominates a text, authorial intent loses authority. What remains is an open exchange between words and interpretive communities. Each reader becomes a co-author, responsible for assigning meaning. Stanley Fish called these interpretive communities—groups whose shared assumptions make certain readings possible and others unthinkable. Without such communities, no passage yields a stable sense. It follows that truth and beauty arise only in collective negotiation; there is no objective canon, only ever-shifting coalitions of interpretation. Eloquence depends as much on audience as speaker. Words can persuade, but they can also evade or flatter through coquettish circumlocution, hypocrisy, magniloquence, even soliloquy—which performs not for others but for the self. Every speech act depends on its recipient. In an age of pressure towards conformity, people cling to regional idioms, subculture slang, niche jargons—not only to mark identity but to sustain it. Those idioms are doubly personal and social, always shaped by historically wider circles of discourse. Paul Ricoeur's 'masters of suspicion'—Marx, Freud, Nietzsche—taught that surface meanings conceal deeper economic, psychological, and existential forces. Ferdinand de Saussure can be seen as a fourth 'master of suspicion' for revealing the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs and distinguishing between 'langue' (the language system) and 'parole' (individual speech). His view challenged the idea of language as a transparent mirror of reality or direct conduit of thought. To see a slogan is not simply to hear a phrase, but to glimpse power, desire, or repression beneath it. Reading becomes an act of excavation, a journey from complacent acceptance to critical distance.

Karl Kraus described aphorisms living between half-truth and 'one-and-a-half truths', neither full nor empty—paradoxes unresolved. He understood language as both mother and laboured child of thought, cracked open by repeated critique. Kraus trusted neither cliché nor collaborator; he demanded that every sentence be actively wrestled with. He believed education fails when it is received, not transformed. He believed safe opinions house nothing of value; only turbulent ideas matter. To savour a text, Kraus said, criticism must be turned into labour. That is to say: a genuine encounter with language is work; it is conditional, incomplete, and unafraid of contradiction. So, what becomes of public meaning when institutional or media-language turns mechanical? Slogans become proxies for thought. Perfunctory statements take the place of substance. Habits ossify into default speech, and yet authority remains.

Through this dynamic public perceptions are shaped—not by argument but by atmosphere, not by logic but by refrains looped until they numb. Meaning shrinks as rhetoric, style, and affect swell. Now, with mass media and digital platforms, this process accelerates. Cinema and television do more than present—they stage. Viewers are complicit in the 'role-entry agreement': they accept falsehood yet repeat it, merging fiction into fact. Genre conventions replicate expectations. Politics becomes theatre. Emotional tone replaces argument. The boundary between experience and simulation vanishes; language no longer describes but stages. What began as communication becomes choreography of compliance. Ironically, empathy can be corroded by oversaturation of media itself. Euphemism hides suffering, ornament cloaks emptiness, polished speech numbs awareness. Words continue—but meaning departs. The danger is not that people are misled, but that they stop listening to their own capacity to hear. Public life stales: discourse becomes a mechanical echo. In such moments, speech occurs—but no one is present. A ghost of meaning lingers, felt but empty.

The cure? Not more purity, but more vigilance, clarity, care. One form of critique is to render inflated speech into literal form, not to mock, but to reveal. Take the florid political statement: strip its metaphors, expose its lack of coherence. Underneath what seemed profound is often mere circularity. Pretended moral urgency collapses into mechanical phrasing. What seemed real is ceremony. This matters because public language becomes detached through repetition. The more a phrase is uttered, the less signifying force it carries—yet hearers still respond. It is through such mechanisms that collective perceptions are shaped. Not by convincing, but by cultural saturation. Not by persuasion, but by presence. It is here that the chimera of language becomes a pathology. Words continue—but meaning fades, replaced by comfort, blind faith, cultivated ignorance. The public sphere turns from discourse into ritual: each statement calms, confirms, numbs. The ethical response is not contemptuous distancing but engaged resistance. Critique must retain precision, not dilution, humility, not cynicism. The critic becomes both surgeon and servant, removing infection yet preserving the voice. Language deserves that reward. Its illusions are not enemies—they are invitations. Deception both exposes and teaches. What misleads, when examined, can instruct. The key is not to escape illusion, but to notice its direction, its limit. When fantasy is reclaimed as discipline—not as escapism but as a practiced awareness of possibility—language reawakens. It regains its capacity to open, wound, catalyse inquiry. In that moment, writer and philosopher share purpose: both preserve an ethical intensity of words. They care less about answers than about asking the right questions. That means embracing uncertainty, liminality. Meaning is never a destination—it is an evolving landscape of interpretation. A statement does not lie at the end of inquiry, but at its edge. The artistic or philosophical echo is not proof, but proof of life: the proof that language still breathes.

Words cannot be finally proven or pinned down. Their meanings shift with context, echo, and audience. Even the most rigid texts—laws, treatises—depend not just on logic but on rhythm, pause, tone. Language is not neutral data; it is performance. Words act they threaten, console, seduce, and obscure. They do not mirror reality—they construct it, distort it, rearrange it. Their force lies not in truth but in relation. Society demands speech to sustain its structures, pressuring individuals to share and engage. But what is being shared? Often, unverifiable words—received slogans, habitual phrases, accepted meanings held together by inertia and community trust. Interpretation does not emerge from the word alone, but from the web of assumptions surrounding it. Meaning is made collectively, not found individually. To speak is not to disclose facts but to perform roles, to participate in rituals of understanding. Silence, therefore, becomes subversive—not an absence, but a refusal to participate in unverifiable

speech. True communication lies not in certainty, but in shared attention to the ambiguity of expression. Language must be approached not as fact, but as art. Only then can it reawaken conversation and restore its power to reveal, rather than merely persuade.

Self-consuming artefacts

Stanley Fish[31] shifted the focus of literary theory from author and text to the active role of the reader: meaning does not dwell in fixed words, but in how individuals and groups engage with them. His notion of 'interpretive communities' argues that readers bring shared assumptions, habits, and interpretive strategies, shaping a text even as they believe they are discovering it anew. Within such communities, reading becomes a dynamic exchange between past conventions, current beliefs, and emerging interpretations. Literary works, then, behave like self-devouring machines: they generate the very responses that remake them, always consuming the ground beneath their own stability to conjure new meaning. No text ever stands still. Fish's famous phrase—'self-consuming artefacts'—captures this beautifully. These artefacts yield no stable signification; instead, they collapse and reform under scrutiny, challenging the illusion that any text holds a fixed truth. A pun, a rhetorical twist, a subverted phrase: each playful gesture underscores the fluid choreography of meaning in motion. As Fish observes in 'How to Recognise a Poem When You See One', the distinction between poems and non-poems emerges not from formal criteria but from the interpretive commitments readers make. To witness language deconstructing itself is to recognise that how words mean often outweighs what they mean. Rhetorical questions like 'Is that so?' lose their burden of certainty when they twist and gesture—and open space for reflection. Idioms like 'break the ice' or 'raise the bar' invert under reinterpretation, no longer symbols of social ritual but reflexes of shifting communities. Each phrase carries embedded history and assumption—and no phrase is immune to playful upset. Rhetoric becomes the tool of deconstruction. A pun with 'bark' can deconstruct the stability of tree, dog, and language itself. In the poem 'Mending Wall', Robert Frost said, 'Good fences make good neighbours', but you turn it into 'Good fences make bad migrants', and suddenly the meaning fractures, implicates ideology, and forces us to ask how phrases circulate.

The game must never freeze. No dialectic should ossify into dogma. Fish warns against the myth of the author's authority and the aesthetic hierarchy that crowns certain texts. Instead, meaning is a rule-governed puzzle whose rules shift as interpretive communities shift. We must remain vigilant—language is unstable; meaning is provisional. This vigilance disarms any metaphysical or aesthetic claim embedded in text. A grand poetic image—'the moon was a ghostly galleon'—is beautiful until someone reads it as a colonial metaphor, commandeering the imagination. Ritual praise becomes parody; solemn metre becomes mechanical echo. Every claim of transcendence must be met with a wink: language serves the reader's game, not some silent object of truth. Even academic terminology proves unstable. Words like 'sustainability', or 'climate scepticism' mean different things in different interpretive communities. The phrase itself does not decide; the reader's community does. Speech acts become performative, not declarative. Fish's project asks readers to track the turns of language: how signification loops back upon itself, consuming its ground. Like conceptual art that tears down the frame, each metaphor, each trope, eats its own premise. When language performs 'deconstruction', it reveals itself as an ever-shifting matrix. This holds in academic writing, courtroom speech, political ads: every genre eats itself. A legal code promising impartial justice becomes a tool of power once interpreted by lawyers, judges, and legislators. Technical terms like 'evidence-based'

[31] Fish, Stanley (2000). "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One". Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature: 267–278.

become ritual tokens—repeatable, but no longer interrogable. Each silo reinforces itself through jargon and shared assumptions—until its interpretive community reconstitutes it. The reader-response theory does not claim that 'anything goes'. Rather, he shows that meanings are historically and culturally situated. Our interpretive habits are contingent, but not arbitrary. And yet—there is always the potential for rupture. A critic within the same community can point out how a phrase cages thought: revealing, for instance, that 'pro-life' does not necessarily mean what it says. The meaning reconfigures, cracking open.

No text stands apart from its reader; its meaning is constructed within interpretive communities—groups of readers who share linguistic habits, assumptions, and interpretive strategies. Entering such a community means learning its codes: mastering its idioms, its styles of questioning, its ways of assigning value to words. You do not join by agreement but by fluency—by demonstrating that you can read, write, and respond in the ways the community already understands. What you gain is access to meaning-making power. Legal, educational, and bureaucratic institutions depend on this mastery. Specialised language becomes both gatekeeper and weapon—empowering those fluent in its use while excluding others. In legal discourse, for example, language appears objective but is shaped by strategic use; knowing how to 'speak' its formulas grants legal and political power. Educational systems operate similarly, rewarding those who absorb and reproduce dominant linguistic forms, thereby reinforcing social stratification. Discursive power extends beyond institutions. As Foucault argued, language constructs what is considered true or normal. Those who set the terms of discourse also shape reality. Interpretive communities regulate these norms, embedding inclusion and marginalisation in their practices. Language becomes a force that crafts identity, aligns thought with power, and disciplines deviation. Mastery means entry into a world where words shape possibility—and where questioning them means risking exile. In this sense, texts and institutions are self-consuming: they feed on the energy of readers and actors who accept their terms, even as they offer the illusion of stable meaning. Only by recognising their provisional nature—and our role in their performance—can we reclaim agency over the realities they produce. Language is a powerful tool for controlling information and shaping public perception. Those who control its use—politicians, media, institutions—can frame events and ideas to set agendas and define what is deemed important. Through propaganda, language manipulates emotions and reinforces ideologies by repetition and persuasion. It also creates social norms by labelling behaviours and identities as acceptable or deviant. Stereotypes and titles shape social hierarchies, reinforcing power structures. In this way, language not only conveys meaning but structures reality, influencing what people believe, how they behave, and who holds influence in society.

Deconstructive play is thus not a taste for nihilism, but an intellectual discipline. It demands we interrogate commonplaces, loosen clichés, and acknowledge the labour by which texts produce sense. A slogan on a ballot, a poetic line, a scientific assertion, a weather forecast—they can be deconstructed, shown to be fragile and provisional, not apodictic. Consider a common phrase: 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'. A simple counterclaim—'absence makes the heart go wandering'—creates a pun that upends the poetic wisdom. The shift enacts the instability built into idiom and points to the reader’s role in co-creating meaning. The line becomes a site of interpretive suspense. No interpretive community can claim full neutrality. Each claim to truth is circumscribed by reading protocols shared among its members. A poem does not speak unless a community allows it to speak. A legal code does not apply until enforcers and adjudicators interpret it. And a political slogan evokes consent only within publics willing to deploy it. This recognition demands continuous questioning: not only of texts, but of

interpretive norms, of institutional contexts, of the tacit rules governing reading. The game is not to expose hidden meanings under texts—they are already exposed. The game is to expose the rules themselves, and how those rules create and constrain meaning. In this vein, educational reform that treats reading as technique, as exposure to texts' interpretive glitches, fosters intellectual resilience. Students learn not to seek stable meaning, but to play interpretive games with awareness of their own commitments. The concluding thought: the reader's responsibility is radical vigilance. To prevent closure, to stay open to pun, to perform critique, to understand that sounds are flux. Language is not an instrument of fixed knowledge but a game of shifting tokens. We must treat words as unverifiable, open to negotiation, spread before us as artefacts consuming themselves in the act of reading. Thus, 'self-consuming artefacts' are not defects, but invitations. To live with language is to accept instability. Meaning is not delivered—it is played.

Linguistic Entropia

Linguistic entropy measures the uncertainty within language. In information theory, entropy quantifies the unpredictability of a message: the more unpredictable the next word, sound, or phrase, the higher the entropy. Applied to language, this means a highly entropic language system is filled with ambiguity, digressions, and unpredictability. Low entropy suggests predictability and order—simpler grammatical rules, fewer words, more direct communication. In practice, entropy can be detected in the frequency of word usage. English, for instance, has relatively low entropy. Some words appear far more often than others—'the' or 'is' more frequent than 'hippopotamus' or 'paradox'. As such, one can often guess what word comes next, reducing unpredictability. Conversely, in systems where each word or sound is equally likely, prediction breaks down and entropy increases. Over time, languages change in ways that affect entropy. The dropping of suffixes, the rise of tones, or the use of classifiers alter the structure and predictability of communication. This is not necessarily a linear path toward clarity or complexity—sometimes a simplification in one part of the language increases ambiguity in another. Language does not evolve toward understanding, but toward proliferation: more words, more ways to say the same thing, more divergence, more hierarchy.

This leads to two key propositions. First, the more complex the language, the more intricate the social structure. Vocabulary becomes a tool of distinction. Language transforms into a pyramid—at the top, those who master jargon, euphemisms, irony, and coded rhetoric; below, the rest who nod in confusion or pretend to understand. Language is no longer a bridge but a ladder. Hierarchies thrive on complexity. The academy, the law, the bureaucracy, and the priesthood have always spoken their own dialects. Second, complexity breeds misunderstanding. Not because we lack intelligence, but because language becomes a spectacle of inertia. People repeat phrases and slogans not to express thoughts but to gain social approval. Speaking is no longer for clarity, but for performance. This entropic drift does not clarify meaning; it obscures it. The pretence of communication replaces the act. Complexity becomes camouflage. As language grows denser, society grows more unequal. Technical and bureaucratic idioms become symbols of class. The elite send their children to master these codes in expensive schools, while the rest flounder. If you want to participate in the ruling discourse, you must buy into the linguistic machinery. Otherwise, you fall silent—or invent your own codes.

Fellini's 8½ warned against this proliferation of meaninglessness. 'Why add chaos to chaos?' the writer asks. In a world already drowning in signals, images, and noises, the true mission of the artist is to subtract. To learn silence. Each new utterance, each new book, often

adds only confusion. Language collapses not with a bang but through the slow erosion of clarity. We no longer speak to understand or to be understood; we speak to signify that we speak.
Human language, for all its layers and metaphors, has not evolved since Plato. We are still stuck in the same rhetorical patterns, only more bloated. Meanwhile, the only truly universal language today is the precise code of machines—programming languages, digital instructions, and algorithmic commands. These do not tolerate ambiguity. They perform. In contrast, human speech is filled with hedges, ironies, and double meanings. It is a tool for manipulation as much as connection. It serves ideologies, institutions, and empires. The Tower of Babel is not just a myth—it is the reality of every intellectual striving to leave their own 'brick' in the structure. Writers chase immortality by forging updated terms, puns, neologisms, or entire systems of thought. They are not seeking truth. They seek recognition. But in doing so, they contribute to linguistic entropy. Each new phrase stretches the semantic field. Each novel meaning pulls older meanings into irrelevance. Language inflates like a currency losing value. And the result is Babel: a noise of rival tongues, each competing for authority, none offering understanding.

In societies with high linguistic entropy, social contracts fail. Repression becomes necessary—not only political but linguistic repression. Speech codes, official narratives, censorship, and conformity maintain the illusion of shared meaning. Those who deviate are labelled mad, stupid, or dangerous. Institutions teach only the dominant speech: schools, bureaucracies, media—all train minds to repeat and obey. What remains for the individual? Two paths: silence or stupidity. Not a literal stupidity, but a strategic refusal. One can exit the discourse by playing mad, by feigning ignorance, by refusing to participate in the game of meaning. Stop signalling. Stop explaining. Drop out. Silence, or a parody of speech, becomes resistance. Like a gang slang or a prison dialect, a new language arises outside the dominant code—simple, cryptic, and shared only among the excluded. This is not merely theoretical. Studies estimate that a sizable percentage of U.S. inmates, potentially around 50%, may have dyslexia —they literally cannot decode the dominant educational language. So, they create their own codes, their gangs, their forms of order. Rejected by the linguistic elite, they form new hierarchies from the bottom. Language still organises power—even among those excluded from the official speech.

Meanwhile, a new trend emerges: the ignorant elites. Leaders whose language is shallow, whose slogans are simple, whose authority comes from ignorance, not knowledge. They speak to be liked, not to be understood. The masses, themselves trained in slogan repetition, reward them. It is the revenge of entropy. Language returns to simplicity, not through clarity, but through collapse. As complexity increases, meaning decays. Speech becomes a ritual. It masks thought instead of conveying it. Ready-made phrases stand in for actual ideas. Public discourse becomes theatre—like a chemistry that no longer explores the structure of matter but only seeks usable reactions. We abandon science for alchemy, syntax for superstition. This is not new. Indian music, for example, survives without written notes—it is learnt by memory, by repetition. It works because it does not need abstraction. It produces beauty, not theory. Perhaps our languages should return to this oral simplicity: shared sounds, remembered patterns, a song rather than a book. Because in the end, language is a technology of power. It builds and maintains hierarchies. If a society cannot transmit its power structures across generations—through language—it disintegrates. Walls crumble, borders blur, and only scattered speech remains. The social becomes unsocial. The political becomes linguistic. Every sentence carries a trace of command. Every grammar rule hides a norm. Every 'correct' usage suppresses

alternatives. This is discourse: a structure of rules and limits. Language trains us to obey before we understand. And once we obey, understanding is no longer necessary.

So, what do we do in the face of this entropy? Some will build new languages. Some will play stupid. Some will say nothing. Each, in their way, rejects the illusion that language leads to truth. Instead, they see that language is performance—crafted not to reveal, but to survive. And thus, we arrive at a strange reversal. The more we say, the less we know. The more we define, the more we obscure. The more we construct language systems, the more we fall into the noise of Babel. True understanding, if it still exists, lies in silence—or the brief, passing moment of genuine communion that no grammar can explain. Language Entropia reveals a paradox: as language grows more elaborate, it loses its power to communicate. Hierarchies rise, comprehension fades, and speech becomes an inert performance. Linguistic complexity becomes a symbol of status, not understanding. In this entropy, meaning collapses. Silence, stupidity, or parody may be the only honest responses left.

The two theses of 'Linguistic Entropia':

1. Language Complexity and Power Hierarchy – As language becomes more complex, the intensity of social hierarchies increases. This reflects how intricate language supports more stratified and rigid power structures.

2. Language Complexity and Comprehension Decline – With increasing language complexity, general understanding declines. Language use becomes performative and status-driven, where individuals pretend comprehension to maintain social standing.

1.5. Creating conspiracy

Simple conspiracies

Every interpretative community is, at its core, a conspiracy—not in the sinister sense of hidden agendas or plots, but in the older Latin sense of conspirare, 'to breathe together'. To conspire in this context means to think, speak, and understand together, to participate in a shared rhythm of sense-making. This act of communal interpretation builds the foundations of trust, identity, and collective belonging. Through shared language, people inhabit the same symbolic space. But what begins as a living breath eventually crystallises into doctrine. What was once spontaneous becomes ritualised. The conspiracy hardens into ideology. Over time, these interpretative conspiracies accumulate layers: terminologies, citations, slogans, rules, and formulas. They evolve into elaborate castles of language—doctrinal systems built of dense rhetoric and institutional jargon. These castles promise stability and coherence, but they are structurally fragile. Each explanatory layer demands further interpretation. Every slogan acquires its mythology. Eventually, the core of meaning becomes inseparable from the ornamental shell. Words no longer function as vessels of insight but as tokens of loyalty. Speaking becomes ceremonial. Listening becomes passive. The castle of language collapses—not in a dramatic explosion but in a slow decay of repetition and fatigue. This collapse is often followed by a kind of linguistic waste management. When systems of language become too burdensome, too empty, too performative, communities instinctively respond. Books are discarded. Slogans are mocked. Doctrines are abandoned. People retreat into silence or whisper in reduced, coded speech. Sometimes this purge is literal—public burnings, the abandonment of entire vocabularies, or the death of languages themselves. More often it is symbolic: a quiet refusal to participate in the sanctioned speech of failed institutions. And yet, this purge is not a

loss of factual knowledge. Human knowledge—about living, caring, suffering, creating—does not reside in jargon or texts. It is transmitted through presence, gesture, tone, and storytelling. It is experiential. The great irony of the collapse is that in throwing away linguistic systems, people recover something more essential: the ability to speak and listen as persons rather than functions of an ideology.

As elaborate systems fail, new forms of speech rise. What replaces collapsed language castles are simpler conspiracies. These are lean, potent, and resonant communities of speech. They require no manuals, footnotes, or theory. They operate with hashtags, catchphrases, memes, and slogans. Their appeal lies in their simplicity and intensity. They offer meaning through repetition, intimacy through exclusion, and identity through shared secrets. What was once bound by doctrinal agreement is now maintained by emotional resonance and tribal affiliation. But even these simple conspiracies are not immune to decay. The very slogans that initially forged solidarity begin to harden into clichés. They become economic assets—tokens of brand identity, not truths. What starts as speech becomes a performance of loyalty. People no longer speak to express thought but to confirm group membership. Language begins to shape the speaker more than the speaker shapes language. Once again, communication degenerates into ritual, and solidarity devolves into alienation. This process is accelerated in times of populist disruption. When the language of institutions is exhausted, populism steps in with a more visceral vocabulary: profit, fame, betrayal, victory. Complex political ideas are reduced to binary oppositions. Narratives shrink into phrases like 'they are stealing from you' or 'the elites are lying'. These are not arguments; they are affirmations of moral clarity. The populist speech act is a performance, not a deliberation. It replaces dialogue with declaration. In this environment, conspiracy becomes performance. The conspiracy group acts out its belief system through echo, repetition, and outrage. Slogans replace debate. Identity replaces persuasion. Emotional recognition becomes the currency of legitimacy. Winning means being seen, not being understood. Public discourse becomes a spectacle of resonance: noise echoes noise, affirmation follows affirmation, and contradiction is cast out as betrayal.

This is not a failure of information. As the Pew Research Centre’s 2017 report, 'The Future of Truth', observed, more data does not lead to better understanding. The opposite occurs: people become overwhelmed, distrust grows, and the signal-to-noise ratio collapses. Information becomes chaos. Miscommunication becomes systemic. And if human nature tends toward misunderstanding, then the cycle of conspiracy, indoctrination, mistrust, and consensus is not a flaw—it is our linguistic inheritance. In this world, every syllable hides a conspiracy. Each word is not only a signifier of meaning but a marker of allegiance. We think we are communicating freely, but our speech is already shaped by the codes, interfaces, and algorithms that mediate it. From the rhetoric of advertising to the cues of social media, our words are framed before we utter them. Language is not a transparent bridge between minds but a constructed path, often engineered to mislead or simplify. Thinkers across traditions have registered this crisis. Mallarmé’s poetic silences, Flaubert’s ironic detachment, Mauthner’s dissection of verbal conventions, Joyce’s chaotic inventiveness in Finnegans Wake, Beckett’s minimalism, and Cage’s silent music all bear witness to the erosion of meaning. Their works sought to dismantle the conspiracy of language by revealing its hidden structures. They practiced irony, silence, absurdity, and disjunction not as aesthetic games but as philosophical strategies for resisting linguistic decay.

In our era, these problems are amplified by technology. Platforms are built to reward repetition and virality. Language is tailored for algorithms, not understanding. The digital environment favours brevity, intensity, and shareability. The result is an ecosystem of mini-conspiracies—each group breathing together, repeating familiar lines, and excluding outsiders. These micro-communities conspire through posts, comments, and likes. They build their own castles of resonance, small but fortified by emotion and identity. Escaping this cycle requires more than rejecting old conspiracies or slogans. It demands a new way of speaking—careful, hesitant, open. It means reclaiming silence as a legitimate response, not a failure. In the logic of conspiracy, silence is ambiguous: it can imply secret knowledge or disloyalty. But silence can also be clarity: a refusal to participate in the noise. Irony, too, becomes a tool of resistance. A simple 'I don't know' or 'I'm not sure' can disrupt the flow of ritual speech. It introduces uncertainty into the script, inviting others to pause and reflect. What the world needs now are new houses of conspiracy—communities of shared speech grounded not in certainty but in inquiry. These conspiracies would not aim for closure but openness. They would breathe together in question, not in dogma. They would build trust through the unpredictable rhythms of dialogue, not the rigid beats of slogans. Such communities would resist the collapse of language not by defending castles but by cultivating gardens—small, plural, and alive. In such spaces, language would remain provisional. It would be tested constantly, reshaped by context, tempered by listening. These new conspirators would speak with the knowledge that every word can fail. They would avoid speaking too much, choosing instead to dwell in the tension between thought and expression. Their speech would be less about persuading and more about accompanying. They would open doors rather than build walls.

Simple conspiracies remind us that speech begins as a shared breath. It is not the content of doctrine that binds people but the rhythm of conversation, the act of turning toward one another with words that attempt, however imperfectly, to make sense together. The danger arises when that rhythm becomes rigid, when breath becomes chant, when understanding becomes repetition. Then speech loses its life and collapses. And so, the cycle repeats: from the emergence of a shared language community, to its codification, to its institutionalisation, to its commodification, to its collapse, and the birth of a new breath, a new conspiracy. Every time the castle falls, a simpler house is built. Every time words rot, silence returns. And from that silence, a new rhythm begins. By tracing this cycle, we learn not only how language deceives but how it heals. The future does not lie in preserving structures of speech but in renewing its breath. To conspire anew is not to plot in darkness but to speak, to think, and to understand—together.

Conspiracy theory of language

Language is not merely a tool of communication—it is a conspiracy. Every language community is bound by this shared breath, this silent agreement to produce and interpret sound in a mutually intelligible way. The word we use to describe secret plots is also the one that describes what happens every time two people talk. From this perspective, every interpretive community is a conspiracy, held together not by shared facts but by shared rhythms, expectations, codes, and silences. This idea gains depth and nuance through the work of linguist Jeffrey Elman, whose essay 'Origins of Language: A Conspiracy Theory' (1999) reframes the emergence of language not as a singular invention or genetic gift, but as the outcome of a complex, overlapping interplay of cognitive, biological, and environmental systems. Language,

Elman argues, is a conspiracy in the sense that it emerges from the synergistic collaboration of components not originally designed to produce it. Elman dismantles the notion of language as an innate, domain-specific faculty hardwired into the brain. Instead, he proposes that language results from general-purpose learning mechanisms constrained by the architecture of the brain and shaped by interaction with richly structured environments. He suggests that small evolutionary adjustments—tweaks in connectivity, shifts in developmental timing—accumulate across distributed networks to yield novel functions like language. These tweaks do not produce a 'language module', but align multiple ancestral capacities in a new and unexpected way. The conspiracy lies in the alignment: various cognitive and neural systems conspire over time to create something that seems to be a single, specialised capacity but is, in fact, an emergent property.

In this biological model, language is a system of converging improvisations. It is not encoded in a single gene, nor is it confined to a specific neural circuit. Rather, it is the result of multiple systems—perceptual, motor, cognitive—collaborating without a leader, like a flock of birds forming a pattern in the sky. This image of emergence also lends itself to a cultural interpretation. The structures that produce language competence in individuals mirror those that sustain and reproduce language communities. Every group that speaks a language sustains a shared illusion: that what is said is what is meant, that what is meant is what is understood, that understanding is shared. But this illusion rests on trust, and when trust collapses, so does the language. Philosopher Umberto Eco captured this fragility when he remarked in his 2011 conversation with Paul Holdengräber that conspiracies endure because they offer a seductive structure of belief. 'The quickest way to unite a society', Eco observed, 'is to invent a common enemy'. In Eco's world, conspiracy is not a deviation from normal discourse—it is the form that language takes when its foundations of shared meaning are shaken. In The Name of the Rose, the labyrinthine library becomes the site of both knowledge and confusion, and truth is buried beneath layers of delay. Eco warns that the most powerful secrets are often empty, sustained only by the fervour of those who believe in their hidden meaning. Elman's theory of language as an emergent conspiracy finds an uncanny echo in Eco's idea of cultural conspiracy. Both highlight the way systems—biological or social—generate unexpected complexity through interaction. Both also show that this complexity can collapse into paranoia. Every community that 'breathes together' in shared meaning also runs the risk of turning inward, mistaking its own assumptions for truth, and labelling the outside world a threat.

Speaking to different language groups adds a mystical layer to the theory of language as conspiracy. Language becomes a conspiracy between speakers. When you switch from English to Russian, the excluded group is immediately alienated. Language includes and excludes by design. This is not merely a social fact—it can be a metaphysical one. Sound is the foundation of reality. The world is vibration, and language is a refined form of that vibration. A mantra, repeated silently or aloud, is not simply a linguistic token but a resonance that moves through body, mind, and spirit. By refining sound within oneself one can access subtler layers of consciousness, culminating in silence—the ultimate language. Here, conspiracy is both the spoken agreement among a group and the unspoken connection between individual and cosmos. Language becomes a sacred resonance as well as a social code. Modern digital culture, however, reveals the darker sides of linguistic conspiracy. A recent study[32] on 'The Language of

[32]Fong, A., Roozenbeek, J., Goldwert, D., Rathje, S. and van der Linden, S. (2021). The language of conspiracy: A psychological analysis of speech used by conspiracy theorists and their followers on Twitter. Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 24(4), pp.606–623. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220987596.

Conspiracy' analysed the tweets of prominent conspiracy influencers and their followers. The results show stark linguistic patterns: conspiracy language is dense with anger, fear, certainty, and references to death, power, and exclusion. Followers of conspiracy theories show a heightened use of words that imply group identity, absolute truth, and apocalyptic stakes. By contrast, the language of science communicators emphasises exploration, curiosity, the future, and collective well-being. This division is not merely ideological—it is linguistic. Each group uses language to build and maintain its own conspiratorial community. The conspiracy theorists breathe together in fear and suspicion; the science communicators breathe together in hope and inquiry. Each constructs a world, and each defends it against the other. The conspiracy of language becomes not just a method of bonding but also a strategy of exclusion. What unites within also divides without.

The cycle of language—from trust to indoctrination to suspicion to collapse—is a recurring pattern in human history. As interpretive communities grow, their language becomes more complex, more exclusive, more ritualised. Slogans replace meaning, repetition replaces understanding, and speech becomes hollow. Eventually, these castles of language collapse, and new conspiracies are born. The simpler the story, the stronger the bond. People once more begin to breathe together, united not by doctrine but by shared disbelief in doctrine. As mistrust of official narratives rises, informal conspiracies gain appeal. They offer a raw, emotional clarity that institutional language can no longer provide. This pattern is evident in political life, religious movements, and artistic revolutions. Language evolves from poetic silence to rational critique, from critique to institutionalisation, from institution to alienation, and from alienation back to poetic silence. This is the cycle of the genealogy of speech. It is not just a biological process but a cultural one. It mirrors what Elman called the 'conspiracy' of systems interacting to produce novelty. In this case, it is novelty of meaning, novelty of trust, and novelty of community. Wittgenstein once wrote that the limits of my language are the limits of my world. But perhaps our world is limited not by the boundaries of language but by the kinds of conspiracies we allow it to form. Do we breathe together in fear or truth? Do we speak to include or to exclude? Do we trust that our words can reach the other, or do we merely perform them as rituals of belonging?

In a world flooded by information but starved of understanding, the role of language is both more powerful and more fragile than ever. More data does not mean more clarity. In fact, it may generate more confusion. Human nature seems to gravitate not just toward misinformation but toward miscommunication. This is the final irony of the conspiracy of language: the more we say, the less we may understand. The more we share, the less we may connect. To counter this, people must cultivate a language that resists both indoctrination and paranoia. We must listen for silences, embrace ambiguity, and remain suspicious of certainty. Language is never a finished product. It is always a negotiation, a breathing-together that must be renewed with every word. A conspiracy theory of language reveals not a plot to deceive but a pattern of emergence, collapse, and rebirth. It shows how we come together through speech, how we fall apart through dogma, and how we begin again through new sounds, new silences, and new ways of breathing together.

'How to Speak about Books We Haven't Read'

'How to Speak about Books We Haven't Read' by Pierre Bayard challenges the dominant cultural narrative that values the act of reading books over the act of speaking meaningfully about them. Bayard suggests that speaking about books we have not read is not only possible,

but essential to navigating modern intellectual life. From childhood, we are taught to be ashamed of unread books. The question 'Have you read it?' hangs over literary culture like a trap, provoking embarrassment or guilt. But Bayard argues that such guilt is misplaced. In truth, no one can read everything, and the ability to speak intelligently about a book does not necessarily depend on having read it in full. What matters is orientation—knowing how the book fits into the broader cultural conversation, understanding its themes, reputation, and context. Two people who have never opened the same volume can have a meaningful conversation about it, provided they share the same general frame: its subject, its place in history, its style or impact. Readers must become authors by treating unread books as opportunities for creative interpretation. Speaking about a book without having read it does not have to mean lying. Rather, it involves constructing a personal version of the book—shaped by its cultural echo, reviews, adaptations, and fragments absorbed indirectly. This approach allows each person to inhabit the book through storytelling. If you can speak with enough authority, says Bayard, you might even convince others that you authored the book yourself. This process turns conversation into a creative act. Retelling a novel by your own standards—never simply summarising or quoting—transforms discussion into a form of authorship. The act of speaking about a book becomes a way of participating in culture, not just consuming it.

This attitude recalls Robert Musil's fictional librarian, who never reads the books in his care but knows their relationships. The value of a book is not located solely in its content, but in its position within the library. Culture, in this sense, is a system of orientation. One does not need to read every book; one needs to know where it fits. Understanding a book's relation to other works, movements, and ideas is often more important than internalising every page. With a good map of the literary world, one can speak with insight even about books one has not read. The ability to discuss books intelligently, then, depends more on navigation than on total knowledge. Mastery of the catalogue—the network of references, influences, and echoes—is key. This emphasis on orientation links to another central idea: the unreliability of memory. In Plato's Phaedrus, Theuth presents the invention of writing to King Thamus as a gift, only to be warned that writing will produce forgetfulness, not memory. Writing creates the illusion of knowledge while weakening our inner faculties. Bayard draws on this insight to explore how we remember books we have read. Even when we read, our mental image of the book changes over time. We rewrite the book in our minds with each recollection, influenced by our experiences, emotions, and conversations. The books we carry within us—the 'inner books'—are not fixed texts but mutable phantoms. As such, we are always speaking about books we have not really read, because the act of remembering distorts them. In this way the boundary between reader and critic is dissolved. Every discussion of a book is inevitably also a discussion of the self. True criticism, he says, is autobiography in disguise. When we analyse a novel, we do so from a position of distance—spatial, temporal, or emotional—that enables reflection. This distance allows us to project our fears, desires, and perspectives onto the book. Criticism becomes a mirror in which we examine our own lives, our own intellectual journey. Even gossip, in its own way, becomes a form of self-exploration, a tool for articulating unspoken parts of the psyche.

The radical insight is that the unread book liberates us. It frees us from the tyranny of the canon and the guilt of incompletion. It allows us to reframe reading not as a duty but as an invitation—to interpret, to imagine, to invent. Reading becomes a form of self-discovery, a way to write our own lives. The act of critical reading does not depend on mastering the text. It

depends on using the book as a springboard for self-invention. The book is a pretext; the reader is the real subject. To read critically, then, may mean to not read literally—to look away from the text and turn inward. The unread book becomes a space for creative freedom. The idea that speaking about unread books is a legitimate and even necessary practice is developed further rhetorical technique. In the Roman rhetorical practice of 'suasoria', the speaker imagines addressing an audience—whether senators, citizens, or enemies—in a dramatic monologue. This method trains one's ability to speak persuasively even without firsthand experience. In contemporary terms, it means learning to talk about a novel as if one were inside it, using one's imagination and logic to construct a narrative. The suasoria blends public performance with private thought, transforming the act of speaking into an artistic discipline. Through daily reflection—what the Romans called 'diarium'—we come to understand that each reading, or non-reading, is part of our personal development. The same book read at twenty and then again at forty will yield different insights, not because the book has changed but because we have. Every encounter with literature is a moment in a diary, a line in a lifelong conversation with ourselves. What matters is not whether we have completed every text, but what those texts, glimpsed or imagined, reveal about us.

Culture is not a static body of knowledge but a living network of references. Instead of reading and remembering everything the ability to move among books is prized —to know what to search for, what to ignore, what to synthesise. Literature is a set of coordinates, not a list of obligations. Speaking about books is a way of speaking about your standpoint in culture. The book becomes a phantom, a ghost we summon to hear our voice. Once freed from the burden of mastery, we can engage with literature creatively. We are not passive recipients of someone else's meaning, but active participants in a collective dream. Even fragments and summaries, once absorbed, become raw material for our own expression. Each quotation, each paraphrase, enters our inner library and is recomposed by our needs. This creative captivity—being held, not by another's authority, but by the stirrings of our own imagination—is what transforms the unread book from a source of shame into a source of strength. Bayard's call is ultimately liberating. In a world where reading lists grow longer by the day, and where literary status often masks insecurity, he invites us to speak freely—not as frauds, but as authors. To speak about books, we have not read is to acknowledge the fluid nature of memory, the creative power of interpretation, and the centrality of the self in all acts of reading. In the end, it is not the book that speaks, but the reader. And the reader, like the storyteller, is always in the process of becoming. Unread books are not symbols of ignorance but catalysts of creativity. In the space between what we know and what we imagine lies a fertile field. It is here that we find the confidence to speak, not to deceive, but to invent. We move beyond cultural shame, beyond rote summary, and into the realm of mythmaking. For what is literature, if not the endless retelling of stories we have never truly read, but have always understood?

Most language resembles speaking about books we have not read, people we have never met, and things we do not truly know. We repeat phrases, tell stories, and voice opinions built from fragments, echoes, and borrowed meanings. Rather than reflecting certainty, our speech is often improvisation—guesswork disguised as truth. Yet this is not a flaw, but a form of shared mythmaking. Language thrives not on perfect knowledge, but on our collective willingness to imagine, invent, and speak as if we understood.

Language of cults

Language is the operating system of belief. In Amanda Montell's 'Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism', she explores how speech—its euphemisms, rhythms, redefinitions, mantras, and silences—binds followers not only to fringe religious movements but also to mainstream corporations, boutique fitness communities, charismatic influencers, and political ideologies. From self-help groups to conspiracy forums, from new religious movements to Instagram coaching collectives, it is language—cultish language—that creates identity, sustains allegiance, and draws the line between who belongs and who does not. Montell introduces the term 'Cultish' to describe a flexible, ubiquitous, and profoundly manipulative register of speech. Cultishness is not restricted to isolated communes or charismatic spiritual leaders; it pervades secular life. CEOs, social media personalities, yoga instructors, and politicians all use the same linguistic tools to cultivate authority and reinforce belief. These tools include euphemistic rebranding of ordinary words, mysterious acronyms, insider catchphrases, and emotionally charged buzzwords that foster an atmosphere of revelation. In every cultish community, language is not just a means of communication—it is a ritual of belonging. What makes cultish language so powerful? The answer lies in how speech shapes perception. Words are not neutral labels; they are scaffolding for thought, experience, and moral judgment. When a leader introduces a new linguistic code, they are not merely naming reality—they are altering it.

In performative language—utterances that do not describe actions but perform them. When someone says, 'I do' at a wedding or a judge declares 'guilty', the words themselves enact change. Repeated mantras, slogans, or catchphrases in cultish speech function similarly. They do not just reflect reality; they reshape it. Repeating a phrase like 'trust the plan' or 'raise your vibration' reconfigures how one interprets events and experiences. Eventually, reality is filtered entirely through this new lexicon. Even minimal linguistic participation can lead to deeper forms of indoctrination. Newcomers to a community may begin by echoing a chant or adopting a hashtag, believing it harmless. Yet these verbal cues serve as the entry points to group identity. Speech is the easiest behavioural shift and often the first to occur; it feels like play, not surrender. But once language changes, thought and behaviour often follow. Social psychologist Albert Bandura's 1999 study 'Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities' revealed that people were more likely to inflict harm on individuals who had been labelled with dehumanising terms like 'vermin' or 'animals'. This experiment demonstrates the ethical stakes of language. When followers label outsiders as 'toxic', 'unawakened', or 'asleep', they justify exclusion, condescension, and sometimes even violence. The cultish lexicon serves to affirm the in-group's moral superiority while vilifying dissenters.

Cultish language is not limited to dangerous sects. Corporate jargon, wellness lingo, and startup culture are riddled with phrases designed to obscure power and enforce compliance. Expressions like 'missional synergy', 'intentional community', or 'holistic success metrics' function as ideological armour. They sound profound but discourage scrutiny. They perform depth without offering content. In a corporate setting, language becomes a tool to mask coercion behind the glow of positivity. This phenomenon mirrors what Kendall Davis identifies in theological contexts: words often lose their doctrinal content and become markers of social capital. Phrases like 'authentic Christ-centred community' or 'intentional walk with the Lord' function less to communicate beliefs and more to distinguish insiders from outsiders. The more jargon one can reproduce fluently, the more committed they seem. And the more fluent they are, the harder it becomes to step away without feeling alienated from that identity. These

observations resonate with Tara Isabella Burton's claim in ' Strange Rites - New Religions for a Godless World' that modern society is not secular but spiritually self-focused. In this landscape, social media acts as both cult platform and cult leader. Algorithms curate belief systems by feeding users content that confirms their biases and deepens their convictions. 'No 'cult leader' takes advantage of our psychological drives quite like the Algorithm', Montell writes. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok incentivise emotionally charged, simplified messages that can be easily shared and internalised. Hashtags replace hymns. Stories replace scripture. Social media also amplifies what Montell calls the 'New Age spiritual-ese'—a lexicon of vague positivity and pseudo-scientific mysticism. Words like 'alignment', 'manifestation', 'intention', and 'frequency' sound spiritual but lack clear definition. They are appealing precisely because they are malleable. They provide users with the illusion of insight and transformation while asking little in return. The linguistic vagueness invites users to fill in the blanks, making the message feel personal and profound.

But cultish language does more than unite. It silences dissent and halts critical thinking. In 'Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism' (1961) Robert Jay Lifton coined the term 'thought-terminating cliché' (also known as a semantic stop-sign, a thought-stopper, bumper sticker logic, or cliché thinking) to describe expressions designed to end discussion rather than foster it. He referred to the use of clichés, along with 'loading the language', as 'the language of non-thought'. These include phrases like 'it is what it is', 'do not overthink it', or 'just trust the process'. In cultish contexts, such phrases operate as linguistic shields, deflecting doubt and shutting down analysis. Their purpose is not to resolve questions but to declare them off-limits. Montell links this tactic to groups like Scientology, where L. Ron Hubbard's 'Technical Dictionary' offers dense, redefined terms that only insiders understand. This specialised language draws sharp lines between believers and sceptics. The more complex the vocabulary, the more loyal the adherents appear—and the less room there is for scepticism. Keith Raniere's NXIVM operated similarly, with elaborate jargon masking unethical practices. This complexity disguises manipulation as enlightenment.

A 2020 study,[33] 'Compensatory conspicuous communication: Low status increases jargon use', adds a sociological dimension. Brown found that institutions with less cultural capital often compensate with more jargon. Legalese, acronyms, and technical terms are used not to clarify but to impress. People with lower status tend to use more jargon (complex language) to compensate and impress, prioritising status over clarity. Montell applies this insight to cultish environments, where linguistic density becomes a marker of superiority. Understanding the jargon becomes proof of commitment. Not understanding is seen as a failure of character. Cultish language thrives wherever power is unaccountable. In politics, it becomes populist sloganism. In corporations, it is productivity jargon. In spirituality, it is New Age mysticism repackaged for digital consumption. Regardless of context, the linguistic strategy is the same: simplify complex ideas, emotionalise vocabulary, isolate dissenters, and turn language itself into a tool of loyalty. In a secular context, this insight remains relevant. Whenever language is used to claim absolute understanding—whether of politics, health, success, or community—it risks becoming idolatrous. It pretends to speak truth while flattening reality into a system of control.

[33] Brown, Z. C., Anicich, E. M., & Galinsky, A. D. (2020). Compensatory conspicuous communication: Low status increases jargon use. Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes, 161, 274–290. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.07.001

Recognising cultish language requires listening closely: Who is using this phrase? What does it mean? What emotions does it trigger? What questions does it foreclose? The power of cultish speech lies in its subtlety. It often sounds like healing, community, or clarity. But beneath its glow may lie manipulation. Knowing cultish is a form of linguistic self-defence. It teaches us to decode the words around us, to recognise when speech is being used as a tool of persuasion rather than a path to truth. When we become aware of cultish language, we regain agency—not by rejecting community, but by choosing words that open rather than close, that clarify rather than obscure. Amanda Montell's 'Cultish' offers not only critique but guidance. It is a call to reclaim everyday speech from the gravitational pull of manipulation. Whether in digital spaces, workplaces, or wellness circles, the language we use can either connect us or control us. In an era of linguistic saturation, the choice of words is an ethical act. Language is never neutral. Cultish speech, with its euphemisms, slogans, and codes, manipulates identity, belief, and behaviour. The shamans who control the language often control the community. Recognising this manipulation is the first step to resisting it. When we learn to question loaded language and choose clarity over charm, we protect not only our speech but our sense of self.

Corporate jargon

'They' promise you clarity, purpose, confidence, and professional transcendence. For a price. 'They' always speak from the name of 'we', and you feel invited and included. The modern business world is infused with a language that blends aspiration, spirituality, and managerial control—a kind of cultish dialect that sells quick success and emotional certainty. In Sam Blum's 'The Cult-Like Language That's Coursing Through Business', we find that from TED Talks to Instagram life coaches, this language system functions less as communication and more as transformation theatre. It mimics spiritual renewal while funnelling cash and commitment into high-pressure programs offering little oversight and even fewer results. Derek Beres, host of the 'Conspirituality' podcast, describes the essence of this system as 'selling aspiration'. Whether it is multilevel marketing platforms or crypto evangelism, the pitch is always to transcend the ordinary and join an elite circle of insiders. Blum tracks how even cults like Love Has Won (LHW) sold nutritional supplements via livestreams, their sacred message monetised in YouTube's digital temples. In all cases, language is the hook: religious metaphors, motivational refrains, and inflated claims become part of a shared vocabulary. It becomes normal for a company to have a mantra, but it becomes dangerous for a mantra to have a company. As psychologist and cult expert Steve Eichel explains, the line between harmless self-improvement and harmful indoctrination lies in intent. When a content marketer pays $5,000 to a coach who promised a $10,000-a-month business, he gets instead a familiar blend of high-minded promises, vague deliverables, and no refunds. The Federal Trade Commission has begun pushing back, shutting down 'stay-at-home millionaire' frauds and ordering restitution—but most of the ecosystem remains legally and linguistically slippery. How can you censor a promise?

Even once-legitimate ventures fall under the sway of cultic speech. Skyline Movers+Shakers, once a celebrated startup, was co-founded by former students of NXIVM's 'Executive Success Programs'. They boasted a 'revolutionary methodology for fulfilment', yet what they inherited was a vocabulary of abstraction that helped shield deeper dysfunction. The veneer of purpose covered a hollow shell. From this perspective, the language of modern business is not just cultic—it is corporate. In 'Garbage Language: Why Do Corporations Speak

the Way They Do?', Molly Young outlines how the workplace has become a fertile ground for a new dialect: pseudo-technical, metaphor-heavy, and emotionally anaesthetized. At one of her former jobs, ordinary words were mutated and elevated. 'Ask', 'win', and 'fail' became nouns. 'Bucket' and 'whiteboard' were turned into verbs. Neologisms like 'replatform' and 'co-execute' proliferated through meetings and memos. Acronyms like RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) floated without clear meaning. 'These phrases took on the veneer of real words', Young writes, 'by sheer repetition'. But this is not just linguistic drift—it is psychological strategy. By using tech metaphors and vague grandiosity, companies inject meaning into otherwise meaningless labour. Jargon acts as balm for anxiety, masking the disappointment of culture perks, burnout, and job insecurity. WeWork's infamous 200,000-word IPO filing, for example, boasted of its mission to 'elevate the world's consciousness'. This cosmic posturing disguised what was essentially a real estate arbitrage business. As Young notes, it required 'medieval exegesis' to distil real meaning from the florid mess. The same linguistic camouflage was on display in the leaked Slack messages from Away CEO Steph Korey. Under the guise of 'accountability' and 'growth', Korey laid down strict controls on vacation for junior staff. Passive voice and capitalised buzzwords made coercion sound like empowerment. 'Language that could be stretched to any meaning and defended under audit' became the managerial norm. In this atmosphere, the less clear a sentence is, the more plausible deniability it provides.

This theme continues in Jessica Helfand's 'Scammy Flavour: Garbage Language in the Workplace', where the emphasis shifts to the psychological toll of such jargon. In her experience teaching at Yale's School of Management, Helfand observed how students defaulted to phrases like 'looping someone in' or 'taking a deep dive' not to clarify, but to conform. She grouped these into categories: hyphenated mashups ('omni-channel', 'business-critical'), compound phrases ('email blast', 'pain point'), and conceptual hybrids ('shoot an email', 'circle back'). Such terms, she argues, carry 'aspirational authority'. They make young professionals sound savvy, even when their thoughts remain vague. The issue is not only stylistic—it is epistemic. Once internalised, this language becomes hard to forget. Helfand compares hearing an old phrase like 'holistic roadmap' to the feeling of recalling an embarrassing memory. It provokes a cringe of recognition, not because the words are evil, but because they represent a moment when the speaker bought into a lie. These terms are sticky because they promise competence and belonging while requiring very little reflection. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche warned that our 'truths are illusions we have forgotten we created'. Corporate jargon exemplifies this danger. Words like 'optionality' or 'deliverable' sound technical but mean little. Ask an executive to define them precisely, and you will likely enter a spiral of tautologies. The real danger is not just that jargon is empty—it is that it rewards obfuscation. Those who speak the dialect fluently are seen as insightful; those who seek clarity are dismissed as unsophisticated. In both Blum's and Young's accounts, language functions as a tool of emotional seduction and corporate domination. Whether it is a life coach selling spiritual entrepreneurship or a middle manager touting 'operational efficiency', the goal is the same: to mask fragility with performance. When workers internalise this jargon, they become complicit in their own exploitation. They begin to market their subordination as ambition. And as Helfand argues, when this language becomes standard, the workplace becomes a stage for self-branding rather than a space for collaboration or truth.

The consequences are profound. Meaningful dialogue gets drowned out by 'scammy flavour'. Meetings grow longer without growing deeper. Strategies become rituals. Criticism is framed as 'feedback', and firings as 'realignment'. The more meaningless the language, the more valuable it becomes as armour against uncertainty, guilt, and accountability. Corporate jargon is not harmless fluff or trendy shorthand. It is a powerful mechanism for emotional manipulation and structural control. From the cultish promises of career coaches to the euphemisms of CEOs, jargon masks exploitation, conceals failure, and recasts anxiety as empowerment. It transforms language from a tool of understanding into an instrument of mystification—it functions as both mask and mechanism. Behind terms like 'replatform', 'value-add', and 'deep dive' lies a culture of euphemism, where power structures are softened, criticism is deflected, and meaningless tasks are elevated through abstraction. This language does not clarify—it enshrouds. It creates the illusion of productivity, purpose, and innovation while often concealing stagnation, confusion, or coercion. Employees are not just asked to do work; they are expected to narrate it in the company's ritual dialect, turning communication into performance. Jargon becomes a survival tool in workplaces that value plausible deniability and perpetual optimism over truth. Over time, this rubbish language normalises insincerity, discourages honest expression, and erodes the very function language was meant to serve understanding. To challenge it is not simply to demand better words, but to demand a better workplace—one where meaning is restored, and speech can again serve clarity rather than camouflage. In reclaiming language, we begin to reclaim dignity in work. Rubbish should always be disposed off promptly.

Corporate jargon is not a harmless byproduct of workplace evolution—it is a corrosive force that distorts communication, erodes critical thinking, and quietly suppresses human dignity. Buzzwords masquerade as signs of expertise, but in truth, they trade clarity for conformity. This performative language system turns workplaces into theatres of scripted interaction, where sincerity is suspect and authority is measured by one's fluency in vacuous phrases. Over time, such jargon reshapes professional identity itself, rewarding those who recite rather than reflect, and silencing voices that question or resist. But there is dignity in resistance. When language becomes a tool of subordination, jamming that language becomes a moral act. Today's digital-age Luddites are not those smashing machines, but those quietly disrupting corporate speech from within—refusing the script, choosing plain words, and embodying a more human presence in systems that demand uniformity. Like a 21st-century Bartleby, the modern worker who 'would prefer not to' speak in slogans becomes a quiet revolutionary. Because no institutional goal, no matter how profitable or ambitious, is worth more than the truthfulness of human expression.

'The Babble Hypothesis'

If you want to become a leader, start talking. Not necessarily with brilliance or precision, but with frequency. That is the core finding of a growing body of research into what has come to be called the 'babble hypothesis'—the idea that in group settings, those who speak the most are most likely to be perceived as leaders, regardless of the substance of their contributions. In an era increasingly concerned with merit, equity, and authentic leadership, this conclusion is both unsettling and revealing. The term 'babble hypothesis' was introduced by Neil G.

MacLaren and his colleagues, whose comprehensive study[34] 'Testing the Babble Hypothesis: Speaking Time Predicts Leader Emergence in Small Groups', aimed to resolve long-standing questions about what actually causes someone to emerge as a leader in small groups. Their research demonstrates that sheer speaking time—how much a person talks during group activities—predicts leadership emergence better than intelligence, personality traits, or subject-matter expertise. In other words, leadership visibility can be achieved through verbal quantity alone. To test this, MacLaren and his team recruited 256 university students and arranged them into thirty-three groups. These groups were assigned complex problem-solving tasks: either a military computer simulation called 'BCT Commander' or a business planning game named 'CleanStart'. Before the activities began, each group had ten minutes to plan and then an hour to execute the simulation, with one participant randomly designated as the 'operator' controlling the interface. Before and after each session, group members were asked to nominate classmates whom they believed had acted as leaders.

The results were striking. Individuals who spoke for longer periods were far more likely to be nominated as leaders—regardless of how relevant, helpful, or insightful their remarks were. This finding persisted even after controlling for a wide array of variables, including prior familiarity with the game, measured intelligence, personality traits like extraversion or conscientiousness, and even gender. Speaking time stood out as the single most consistent predictor of leadership perception. While not entirely new, this insight offers a strong rebuttal to traditional leadership theories that emphasise content, vision, or moral authority. It also refines previous research by addressing criticisms of earlier experimental setups that constrained communication or failed to consider the interaction between speaking and leadership perception—a problem known as endogeneity. By designing ecologically valid group settings and tracking speech patterns over time, MacLaren's study corrects those limitations and confirms that verbal frequency alone strongly influences who is seen as a leader. The implications are broad. In collaborative settings where no leader is formally designated, people naturally look for cues about whom to follow. It turns out the most powerful cue is not intelligence or decisiveness, but presence—and in group dynamics, presence is signalled primarily by speech. The person who talks most appears engaged, confident, and assertive, regardless of whether their words carry weight. The more someone dominates the verbal space, the more others instinctively defer to their influence. Further nuance comes from findings about gender dynamics. On average, men received more leadership nominations, even when their speech patterns mirrored those of women in the group. According to MacLaren, men gained 'an extra vote just for being a man', a bias that became more pronounced among those who received the highest numbers of votes. This suggests that the babble effect is not entirely neutral or meritocratic; it is entangled with social expectations and implicit biases that further complicate the landscape of leadership perception.

Critics of the babble hypothesis have long pointed to the importance of substance. Some argued that relevance and benefit to the group should matter more than the sheer quantity of

[34] MacLaren, N.G., Yammarino, F.J., Dionne, S.D., Hiroki Sayama, Mumford, M.D., Connelly, S., Martin, R.W., Mulhearn, T.J., Todd, E.M., Kulkarni, A., Cao, Y. and Ruark, G.A. (2020). Testing the Babble Hypothesis: Speaking Time Predicts Leader Emergence in Small Groups. [online] The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). Available at: https://orb.binghamton.edu/management_fac/2/ [Accessed 24 Jun. 2025].

speech. He also raised endogeneity concerns, warning that speaking time might reflect existing perceptions of leadership, rather than cause them. However, MacLaren's team accounted for these variables, offering evidence that even when the speech content is relatively weak—or even irrelevant—participants who dominate conversation still emerge as leaders. This does not mean content is meaningless. In structured organisations or professional environments where performance is measured and accountability is high, empty verbosity can only go so far. Yet the study highlights a deeper truth about human social behaviour: we often equate visibility with authority, noise with competence, and confidence with capability. In many settings, especially informal or creative ones, the act of speaking frequently becomes a performance of leadership itself. Beyond academic research, these findings resonate with everyday experiences in offices, classrooms, meetings, and online forums. We have all witnessed individuals who say little but offer sharp, valuable insights—only to be overlooked. Meanwhile, others dominate conversations with rambling, redundant, or shallow remarks and are rewarded with attention, deference, or leadership roles. The babble hypothesis crystallises this phenomenon: talk enough, and people will listen—not necessarily because of what you say, but because you are saying it.

Understanding the babble effect forces us to re-examine how leadership is identified, rewarded, and cultivated. If speaking more makes you more likely to be seen as a leader, this opens strategic opportunities—but also ethical questions. Should organisations coach employees to speak more just to increase their visibility, even if their ideas add little value? Should leadership training programs prioritise voice over insight? And how can quieter individuals—who may be more thoughtful, reflective, or informed—gain recognition in systems that privilege verbal dominance? There is also the question of resistance. Recognising that language can be used to simulate leadership without embodying it raises the possibility of sabotage—from within. Those who refuse to play the game of performative speech, who quietly abstain from meaningless chatter, may be engaging in a form of modern defiance. In a culture where talk is rewarded over thought, the refusal to babble is radical. Today's workplace dissenters—the silent analysts, the sceptical listeners, the disrupters of empty talk—are not disengaged. They are resisting a system that equates noise with value. They do not parrot slogans. Do not engage in performative verbosity and do not mistake volume for vision. In an environment obsessed with articulation, there is something subversive in silence, or in the deliberate use of words that resist conformity and reclaim meaning. The babble hypothesis is not just a psychological curiosity; it is a mirror reflecting how fragile our markers of leadership really are.

The babble hypothesis reveals that leadership in groups often hinges less on the quality of what is said and more on how often it is said. This insight is both revealing and disturbing, exposing how easily perception overrides substance in our social and professional lives. But awareness of this mechanism offers an opening for resistance. In a world where speech is currency, and babble buys influence, the quiet refusal to engage in empty talk becomes a form of rebellion. Human dignity lies not in the volume of our words but in their meaning. Any system—corporate, academic, or political—that rewards noise over thought undermines that dignity. The true task is not to teach everyone to speak more, but to build cultures where speaking less, and saying more, is finally enough. In such a world, the leader is not the loudest voice in the room, but the one who knows when to speak—and when to listen. The babble hypothesis exposes a troubling linguistic reality: that the quantity of speech is often mistaken

for quality, wisdom, or leadership. This mindset distorts the purpose of language, shifting it from a tool of understanding to a performance of dominance. When 'more' becomes synonymous with 'better', thoughtful silence and meaningful brevity are devalued. Such a practice corrodes genuine communication, rewarding noise over insight and eroding trust in discourse itself. The result is a culture where verbosity triumphs over clarity, and language becomes inflated, manipulative, and hollow. Resisting this trend is essential—not only for fair leadership but for preserving the integrity of language as a shared human good.

Linguistic power structures

For over a century, the Western philosophical tradition has wrestled with the collapse of certainty. What once appeared as stable foundations—God, truth, the self, and language—have been systematically dismantled. The metaphysical desire for an origin, a centre that grounds meaning, has given way to a recognition that no such centre exists. What remains is a landscape shaped not by stable meaning but by shifting linguistic power structures. In this new terrain, language is no longer the transparent medium through which we access truth. It is the very site where power is negotiated, where authority is claimed and contested, where meaning is made and unmade. Jacques Derrida's landmark 1966 lecture 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' marks a turning point. Derrida names three precursors who cracked the foundation of Western metaphysics. Friedrich Nietzsche declared the death of God, unmooring moral and ontological certainty. Sigmund Freud destabilised the self, revealing it as a fractured, unconscious construct. Martin Heidegger erased the metaphysical illusion of pure presence, instead grounding existence in temporality, in the thrown and situated nature of human beings. Together, they dismantled the triad of God, self, and language—displacing the Logos that once anchored Western thought. Derrida's concept of 'différance', a pun on both 'difference' and 'deferral', captures the new condition of meaning. In place of fixed reference, we find a web of signs, each pointing to another, endlessly deferring presence. There is no transcendental signified—no final term that halts the chain. Meaning becomes a function of relational difference, not inherent essence. In this system, there is no pristine language, no universal grammar that guarantees truth. There is only 'parole', individual utterances shaped by context and power, and never reducible to a unified 'langue'.

What follows is not linguistic anarchy but a new kind of order—one governed by the structures of speech, rhetoric, and performance. Language does not mirror reality; it constructs it. Every utterance participates in a dynamic of power. To speak is not just to describe the world but to shape it, impose categories, draw boundaries, and define others. In Derrida's hands, deconstruction becomes more than a method of critique—it becomes an act of intervention, exposing how language legitimates authority and opens possibilities for resistance. Paul de Man's theory of rhetorical reading advances this insight within the realm of literary criticism. He contends that readers habitually impose stable meanings onto texts, mistaking metaphor and ambiguity for literal assertions. In his essay 'Semiology and Rhetoric', de Man analyses the line from Yeats—'How can we know the dancer from the dance?'—to illustrate the instability of meaning. Grammatically a question, it is conventionally read as a rhetorical assertion of unity. The line resists a single interpretation, and this resistance, for de Man, is not a failure of clarity but a reflection of language's nature: figurative, shifting, and unstable. De Man's approach is a form of linguistic scepticism, a via negativa that strips away illusions of interpretive certainty. For him, literature is uniquely poised to reveal the mechanics of meaning-making, because it

foregrounds rhetorical devices rather than disguising them. Where traditional reading seeks coherence, rhetorical reading accepts undecidability. It asks not 'What does this mean?' but 'How does this text make meaning—and unmake it at the same time?' This method reveals that even the most 'literal' language carries figurative tensions. And yet, de Man's approach ultimately leaves us with no final interpretive ground, no resting place. The work of interpretation is never finished; every assertion opens the door to further deconstruction.

Yet, this endless process is not without cost. Critics of deconstruction note how its emphasis on textual instability can become a trap, a self-replicating loop where meaning constantly recedes, and political or ethical claims seem impossible to ground. De Man himself became a symbol of this impasse. As Louis Menand observes, his intellectual rigour was inseparable from a chilling detachment. The same relentless scepticism that laid bare the mechanisms of language also stripped away moral commitments. Deconstruction thus risks becoming a purely formal exercise unless tethered to ethical or political stakes. Hermeneutics offers a different, though related, response to the collapse of metaphysical certainty. It too begins with the recognition that understanding is never neutral or objective. In philosophical hermeneutics, spearheaded by Heidegger and developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, interpretation is seen as a historical and dialogical process. We do not encounter texts from an untouched vantage point; we bring with us a 'historically effected consciousness', shaped by culture, language, and prior understanding. Gadamer's concept of the 'fusion of horizons' describes how meaning arises when the world of the text encounters the world of the reader. This meeting does not erase differences but creates a space for dialogue. There is no final horizon, no universal perspective from which total understanding is possible. Yet, understanding still occurs—not as reproduction, but as transformation. Gadamer challenges the notion that we can recover an author's pure intention or extract a text's fixed meaning. Instead, we must acknowledge the interpretive event as situated, dynamic, and partial.

Paul Ricoeur adds to this hermeneutic tradition by emphasising the productive role of metaphor. In 'The Rule of Metaphor', he argues that figurative language is not merely decorative but generative. Metaphor disrupts literal meaning, forcing us to see things anew. This creative capacity of language opens interpretive possibilities that propositional language cannot reach. For Ricoeur, interpretation is not just a matter of decoding but of imagination—a constructive act grounded in the flexibility and inventiveness of language itself. This view is further radicalised by thinkers like Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson, who dismantle the boundary between language and reality altogether. Rorty's 'World Well Lost' contends that our descriptions of the world are always embedded in linguistic frameworks. There is no pure 'given' experience outside language. Davidson, similarly, critiques the notion of conceptual schemes, arguing that the idea of scheme-independent content is incoherent. For both, language is not a medium that represents the world; it is the fabric out of which our sense of reality is made. Taken together, these perspectives challenge the very foundation of Western metaphysics—the belief that language can guarantee stable reference to an external truth. Instead, language emerges as a field of play, power, and possibility. It is where human understanding, political authority, and cultural identity are constructed and contested. The 'truth' of a text, a leader, or a community does not reside in an original essence but in the shifting interplay of interpretation and rhetorical force.

The implications of this shift are vast. If language is the site of power, then every speech act carries political weight. Every interpretation reconfigures the social order. The philosopher,

the critic, the poet, and the citizen all engage in the same fundamental activity: shaping the world through language. But this also makes language a battleground. The loss of metaphysical foundations does not leave us in a vacuum—it thrusts us into a space where every utterance, every metaphor, every translation is a potential exercise of domination or liberation. What begins as a critique of metaphysics ends with a radical revaluation of language. In the absence of God, self, or Logos, what remains is not silence or nihilism but speech—restless, plural, and deeply political. Language is no longer a neutral bridge to truth but the terrain on which truths are made and unmade. We live within linguistic power structures that frame how we know, who we trust, and what we imagine possible. To speak, write, interpret, or remain silent is to participate in these structures—sometimes reinforcing them, sometimes resisting. Understanding this is not only a matter of theory; it is a matter of ethical and political urgency. In a world without fixed meaning, a new paradigm of language is our greatest hope. Language stands as the last bastion of human civilisation as a cult of power, where meaning is authority, and culture is discipline. As digitalisation absorbs all written expression and AI reshapes communication, the battle over language becomes a battle over reality itself. The lost control over language—its interpretation, production, and distribution—opens a possibility of new narratives of the world. In this unfolding era, the struggle for language is inseparable from the struggle for novelty and change in the power structure.

The self as linguistic problem

For over two and a half millennia, human beings have asked: what is the self? Yet despite its centrality, the self remains elusive, distant—rarely felt in the rhythm of daily life. We do not experience ourselves as pure centres of meaning but as fractured presences responding to external noise. In our era, defined by complexity, technological saturation, and the collapse of shared narratives, the question of selfhood returns with renewed urgency. If the self is foundational, why does it so often seem absent, disoriented, or displaced? Modern life overwhelms us with information, creating chaos in which coherence becomes difficult. Lacking a clear myth or stable narrative to live by, we are left to pursue significance in fragments. Despair arises—not only in a clinical sense, but in its original etymology: a condition of losing hope. Our identities dissolve into shifting roles, driven more by recognition than by rootedness. In this void, the only stability we find often lies in communal rituals and the stories we agree to uphold. They offer temporary coherence to our role-playing selves, yet even these fictions increasingly feel thin and provisional. This erosion of identity and meaning has intellectual roots. Three towering figures—Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche—have shaped our collective suspicion toward all claims of truth. Freud taught that our beliefs, especially religious ones, mask psychological needs; they are comforting illusions born of infantile dependence. Marx showed that the ideas ruling an age are always those of the ruling class, structured to preserve power. Nietzsche, most ruthlessly, revealed how our morality often cloaks resentment and weakness in a garb of virtue. Together, these 'masters of suspicion' shattered metaphysical innocence. What had once appeared sacred now seemed strategic, rhetorical, or neurotic. In the wake of their critiques, a new cultural condition emerged—what Richard Rorty called 'a world well lost'. Certainty gave way to irony. Philosophy appeared exhausted, unable to recover its foundations. Many turned either to cynicism, where every idea is seen as a mask for self-interest, or to a terrified relativism, where no idea can be criticised

without inviting charges of cruelty. In this landscape, conviction itself becomes suspect, a sign not of strength but of hidden agendas.

And yet, amidst this devastation, something human survives. If truth no longer arrives as revelation or system, it may still appear in the form of encounter, relationship, and kindness. Rather than seeking a final theory of the self, we might begin again by listening to others, borrowing language from many traditions without demanding exclusive ownership of any. The figure of the philosopher-poet, or the wounded healer becomes an ethical model: someone who practices humanity, not someone who claims to possess it. As Goethe wrote, 'Werde der, der du bist'—become who you are. This is not a path to conquest but to compassion. In this spirit, the self is not a possession but a practice. We become ourselves not through self-assertion but through openness—through attention to others, through acts of imagination and care. Fixed identities give way to relational selves, shaped in dialogue and narrative. When we treat others as ends in themselves, rather than means to our ambitions, we recover the original power of language—not to dominate but to connect. But the danger of illusion remains, especially when authority and recognition are conflated with insight. The ancient warning, 'sutor ne ultra crepidam'—let the shoemaker not judge beyond the shoe—reminds us to stay within the limits of our knowledge. Yet modern culture, saturated with opinion, rarely heeds this. This ultracrepidarian impulse continues, in politics, social media, and public discourse: people feel compelled to comment on everything, even without understanding anything. Surveys generate opinions rather than capture them. Appearances of certainty often mask emptiness. This desire to appear authoritative extends even into the most elite circles. The phenomenon known as 'Nobel disease' illustrates how prestigious figures—especially Nobel laureates—sometimes opine confidently on topics far outside their domain. Prestige shelters arrogance. The problem reflects a deeper temptation in all public discourse: to equate status with wisdom, and to treat speech as performance rather than inquiry.

In Immanuel Kant's philosophy, particularly within his legal theory (Rechtslehre), laws are understood as universal and objective principles, not as specific rules tied to individuals or situations. This means laws should not be formulated using proper names or referencing specific individuals. But using universal and rational language is always a sign of a power play. The rational language of laws and rules serves the power agenda. The proper language of love uses proper names. More than that all people, places, or things around become proper, specific, and unique. Instead of alienation this 'proper language' brings communion. Proper language use demands humility. It is the linguistic expression of the Self. Using the universal language of laws and rules is just rendition of an abstract rationality. The Self is not included in this collective voice of reason and wisdom. True communication must be rooted in local understanding, empirical observation, and lived experience. Without this, even the most eloquent expression becomes hollow tool of control. Every speaker carries identity, bias, and motivation. Every sentence, however benign, carries potential to clarify—or to manipulate. In this way, language becomes not only a mirror of the self but a battlefield of power.

People are, as many philosophers note, Homo significans: the meaning-seeking animal. We crave not just existence but significance. We invent stories not merely to entertain but to live in. And yet, we are not only 'Homo significans' but also 'Homo esperans'—the human who hopes. We hope for change, for renewal, for meaning beyond repetition. But we find ourselves trapped in cycles where only the slogans and costumes change. The core power structures remain untouched: relations defined by control, not care; societies built on hierarchy, not

dignity. In such a world, the dream of the self begins to dissolve. The opposite of love is not hate, but power. Hate still recognises the other as real. Power denies the other's subjectivity, reducing people to tools. Language of power is never a language of love. Language, in its original form, was not created for domination, but for communion. It was meant to name the world, to negotiate with nature, not to enslave fellow humans. When language becomes an instrument of manipulation—when it serves systems of control rather than mutual recognition—it destroys both meaning and identity.

The real self of every human being is not some abstract essence, but the right to stand equal to any other, to speak truthfully, to be heard, and to love. When societies reduce language to mere propaganda, when human beings are treated as means rather than ends, the very notion of the self is eroded. Without mutual recognition, there can be no self—only masks, roles, or simulations. Civilisation, then, becomes a power structure with no soul. If existence becomes merely a race to be more powerful than others, to exploit them for one's gain, then we lose more than community—we lose the reason to exist at all. The self shrinks into a managerial fiction, calibrated for performance and status but hollow inside. In such a world, there is no dignity, only spectacle. The question of the self has haunted human thought for 2500 years, and no final answer has emerged. But perhaps that is because the self is not an answer—it is a problem, a practice, a possibility. In a time of data saturation, role fatigue, and linguistic inflation, our task is not to secure the self through doctrine, but to open it through dialogue. The future of meaning rests not on dominance but on shared stories, not on superiority but on mutual recognition. To be truly human is not to assert power over others, but to use language for love, for understanding, for dignity. In this lies the only self worth preserving. At the end, the self is its language.

People as meaning makers

Human beings are not just rational or social animals—we are meaning makers. If language is the house of the self, then meaning is its furniture. The shortest description of linguistic meaning is a story, some structure, a narrative. The existential condition for meaning is an interpretive community. From early childhood, 'we'(me and the others around) construct significance out of sound, symbol, and story. We reach beyond what is given and build internal maps to navigate experience. This impulse is not incidental; it is central to our humanity. Meaning is not handed to us fully formed. Rather, we create it actively and individually, shaping the world in our image while being shaped by it in return. Even shared language systems depend on this deeply personal act of sense-making. If a word, symbol, or story fails to resonate on an individual level, it remains inert—an empty vessel. Language offers a shared vocabulary, but it is the listener or reader who brings it to life. The signs and utterances we use every day carry potential, not essence. Their power is unlocked only when someone makes sense of them. Meaning emerges when inner consciousness and outer symbol meet. This is why individuality plays such a crucial role in communication: each of us interprets words and events through the lens of our own experience, desires, and needs. Language is always social—but understanding is always personal. In Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, all thinking is sign processing. He identifies three kinds of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon resembles its object, like a photograph of a tree. An index is causally or contextually linked to its object, like smoke signalling fire. A symbol, by contrast, holds no resemblance or natural tie to its referent—it relies entirely on social convention. The word 'tree', for example, has meaning not because it

looks or sounds like a tree, but because we have collectively agreed to use it in that way. But even that agreement is abstract unless everyone affirms it through use and recognition.

A sign is just an identifying mark, a token, a distinction carved into a background of undifferentiated reality. Meaning begins with negation: this, not that. Every sign is defined by contrast, and every interpretation depends on framing. We are constantly isolating patterns from noise, constructing concepts out of the formless flux of life. The identity of a sign emerges not from its intrinsic qualities, but from its position within a system of difference. To interpret is to stand between form and content, between signifier and signified. The Latin root 'interpres' suggests mediation, translation, and negotiation. There must be an interpretative community to agree on meaning. We are always interpreting—our surroundings, each other, the words we read, the stories we hear. Meaning is neither imposed from above nor found pre-existing beneath the surface; it arises in the act of relation. Communication, therefore, depends not on perfect transmission but on overlapping fields of reference. Consensus is less a fixed outcome than an ongoing process—one forged through conversation, compromise, and the mutual shaping of symbols. Shared meaning is the product of dialogue. While repetition can instil habits, it is through stories, metaphors, and collective rituals that symbols gain real traction in social life. These stories provide maps of orientation—guides for action, frameworks for belief. They are less about truth in an absolute sense and more about coherence, emotional resonance, and shared vision. Our social reality is always under construction, negotiated through the interplay of personal interpretation and communal affirmation.

This negotiation extends even to the so-called hard sciences. In the empirical realm, experiments must be designed, variables defined, and outcomes interpreted—all within the parameters of a conceptual framework. We do not encounter raw reality; we model it. What we see is shaped by the signs we use to see with. That which lies outside our system of signs remains, for all practical purposes, invisible. Language carves the world into meaningful shapes. Without it, everything dissolves into inchoate sensation. Umberto Eco’s concept of the 'open work' of art illustrates this interpretive dynamic in literature. For Eco, a text is not a closed container of meaning but a structured invitation. The author does not deliver a final truth but arranges signs that guide and anticipate the reader’s participation. The reader, in turn, brings their own knowledge, emotions, and imagination to bear. Meaning arises through this collaboration. The blank spaces in a text—the ambiguities, the ellipses, the unspoken—are not flaws but essential sites of engagement. The reader completes the work. This collaborative process is not limited to literature. In storytelling at large meaning is built through layered construction. The narrative draws in the audience by presenting a coherent world grounded in familiar cues: road signs, cultural references, recognisable emotions. The reader enters this constructed reality not as a passive observer but as an emotionally engaged participant.

Beneath this, there are deeper structural layers: the theme that resonates across experience; the historical grounding that situates the story in time; the subtext that conveys hidden tensions; and the spirit of the time that reflects broader cultural dynamics. Characters, meanwhile, are not portraits of real individuals but metaphoric composites—bundles of contradiction and desire that embody the dilemmas we all face. Their journeys give form to our inner conflicts. Expanding on this architecture, showing how stories function as moral laboratories. Through turning points and value shifts, narratives enact the drama of transformation. Every scene, sequence, and act is charged with emotional energy that tests the protagonist’s beliefs. Any type of plot serves the same function: to shape human understanding

through the orchestration of experience. Fiction is not fantasy—it is compression. It captures the defining moments that reveal character, morality, and change. In the hero's journey, the truth of the self is revealed under pressure. Character is not what someone says or believes—it is what they choose in the crucible of conflict. The tension between aspiration and reality, between image and action, between hope and consequence, forms the core of dramatic meaning. Irony sharpens this tension. Every story that ends in triumph also carries a note of loss; every lesson learnt has a cost. Beneath the surface lies the abyss—a reminder that reality always exceeds our narratives, that uncertainty endures beyond every plot resolution.

But conflict is not just a narrative device; it is the pulse of life. Scarcity, competition, contradiction—these forces define our existence. Our beliefs rarely align seamlessly with experience. The friction between them drives both suffering and growth. The hero's journey is not an escape from conflict but a confrontation with it. Through the hero's trials, we see ourselves more clearly. We recognise that our own meaning-making occurs not in clarity but in struggle. And struggle is not only external. Within each of us lives the tension between the desire for significance and the limits of language. We long to say something true about who we are, what matters, why we act—but words often falter. Still, we keep speaking, writing, imagining. This persistence is what makes us going. It is not certainty but the refusal to abandon the search for meaning that defines us. Yet we are not only meaning-makers—we are also visionaries. We yearn not only to understand the world but to change it, not necessarily for the better. The hope for better future, however, is not always noble. Trapped in cycles of repetition, where the slogans change but the power structures remain, our narratives can become instruments of illusion. Language, at its best, is not for controlling others but for understanding and uniting with them. It is our bridge across solitude, our instrument of communion. When we use it to dominate, we sever that bridge. When we shape meaning only to assert status or claim superiority, we distort the very function of language. Meaning then becomes a weapon, and identity collapses into performance. People are the makers of meaning—interpreters, storytellers, dreamers. Our shared symbols shape cooperation, but it is the personal inflection, the act of living and believing through language, that gives them depth. Stories orient us, dialogue refines us, and imagination connects us to realities not yet seen. To be human is to inhabit this creative tension—to speak into the void, to listen across difference, and to make the world matter through the meanings we choose to share.

Speaking precedes thinking

Plato, in the 'Republic', reveals a vision of a harmonious society built upon fabricated but functional myths. His 'noble lie' of the metals—gold for rulers, silver for warriors, and bronze and iron for the working classes—is not meant to be true but to sustain social unity. Even reproduction is managed with this same narrative purpose: arranged mating for the many, selective breeding for the elite. These are myths not for amusement but for direction, engineering virtue through repetition and belief. What matters is not their factual accuracy but their ability to mould a coherent worldview. Plato's truth lies not in data for all times but in concrete dialogue. His politics of speech governs his politics of truth: the myth that convinces becomes the truth that governs. This preference for living speech over inert text is crystallised in his 'Seventh Letter'. There he confesses distrust of writing, warning that true philosophy cannot be bottled into scrolls or treatises. Thought, he believes, must be animated by the immediacy of spoken inquiry. His written dialogues simulate speech, but even they cannot fully

capture what transpires in direct encounter. Writing, for Plato, is an imitation of a process whose vitality lies in the breath, the gesture, the unpredictable rhythm of dialogue. Language is not a storehouse but a living fire: to speak is not just to express thought but to generate it in real time, in concert with another. Writing ossifies what speech performs. The philosopher's mission, then, is not transcription but conversation. Meaning is born between voices of living people, not between pages.

Niklas Luhmann adds complexity to this view with his theory of 'second-degree articulation'. At the first degree, we think in the intimacy of interior monologue and the raw immediacy of speech. At the second, we think through writing, editing, and publication, distancing ourselves from direct experience. The spoken word emerges within the moment; the written word creates a structure over time. Yet there is even a third degree: reflection about the ways we think and speak. In this loop of meta-communication, language turns back on itself—we discuss how we discuss, write about writing, read about reading. Thought becomes recursive, layered, no longer immediate but mediated by multiple levels of representation. The concept of 'second-degree objectivity' follows a similar path. Initially, we seek truth by comparing appearances to facts. But in a more complex world, objectivity requires mapping the positions in a dispute, not pretending all views are equal, but understanding how each is situated. Speaking becomes a performance of positioning. Writing about a controversy is not about extracting neutral truth but revealing the logic of competing claims. Objectivity thus shifts from sterile impartiality to a dynamic field of contested meanings, each shaped by the speakers' access to voice, evidence, and trust. In this context, the very act of communication becomes a negotiation of reality. What we say is shaped not just by what we know, but by who we are and how we are heard.

Hegel, in the 'Phenomenology of Spirit', radicalises this further. For him, appearance is not a veil concealing truth but the necessary form through which truth emerges. The essence of a thing is always mediated by how it shows itself. Appearance precedes essence—not chronologically, but epistemologically. We cannot access what a thing 'is' except through its shifting forms. No appearance is final, yet each contributes to the unfolding of truth. Reality, for Hegel, is a drama of becoming, where each moment of showing points beyond itself. Knowing is an act of appearance reception: a reading of the world's gestures. This aligns with Karl Popper's insistence on falsifiability: what we claim to know must be open to contradiction. Even lies help shape our notion of truth—by falsifying a claim, we become clearer about what is true. Fake news, in this sense, becomes an epistemological catalyst. We reject it not just for being false, but because its appearance fails to correspond with what we believe must be real. Still, this invites a deeper question: is truth what corresponds to reality, or simply what survives in our shared symbolic frameworks? If every 'truth' depends on its appearance, then language becomes our only access to reality—but also its greatest distortion.

Alan Bullock explored this paradox in his 1975 essay 'A Language for Life'. He drew a sharp contrast between speech and writing. Speech, he claimed, unfolds in time, organised around tone groups—each unit carrying a single idea. Writing, by contrast, compacts multiple ideas into more intricate structures. Speech depends on voice, gesture, and intonation; writing relies on grammar, syntax, and punctuation. The speaker must improvise clarity through tone; the writer must anticipate misunderstandings. The two are not merely stylistic variants but separate modes of consciousness. Poetry, Bullock argued, attempts to recover speech's immediacy through rhythm and repetition. A poem resembles live speech: it sounds out

meaning. But literature, especially narrative prose, leans toward writing's complexity. It constructs elaborate mental architecture, where ideas unfold not through sound but structure. Storytelling, even when improvised, never emerges from a blank slate. It always draws from shared plot conventions, character arcs, and emotional beats. Even spontaneous speech borrows from remembered stories. All language is strategy: the teller orchestrates tone and timing to shape response. Bullock also considered how Grice's maxims differ in speech and writing. In spoken conversation, brevity is a virtue; in writing, detail is praised. Oral language depends on immediate relevance and tone, whereas written prose allows for ambiguity, subtext, and indirection. Children learn to speak long before they master punctuation. The written page demands a new kind of attention, where even pauses—expressed as commas—must be learnt. Writing dislocates language from the body.

The problem of audience further complicates writing. Speech always assumes a listener present in time; writing must invent an absent reader. Early writers often under-communicate, assuming a shared context that does not exist. Unlike conversation, where confusion can be cleared instantly, writing must predict misunderstanding. This is not just a technical skill but an imaginative act: to write is to simulate dialogue in solitude. Bullock warned of 'linguistic feudalism'—the global dominance of a few prestige languages. Just as Latin once ruled scholarship, now English command science, diplomacy, and publishing. The empire of writing flattens language; the republic of speech preserves its soul. There is no single universal language. Creoles and patois defy standard grammar but preserve vital oral cultures. Jamaican English and Haitian Creole may share roots, but their rhythm, pitch, and connotation diverge. A standardised text cannot convey this. Writing is stored, copied, and enforced; speech dances with the moment. Meaning in speech is born through relation. It exists only when heard. To speak is to create a world together, even if only for a breath.

Silence is the final frontier of speech: its absence. Silence is not emptiness but fullness without interruption. It suspends the ego, interrupts internal monologue, and opens the possibility of encountering the world anew. In stillness, we rediscover what our words obscure: peace, presence, attention. Silence is a negation of speech's performance, a refuge from language's ambition to name and control. Yet silence is never pure. Even in quietude, we hear foreign voices. What we think of as stillness is always populated by parasite words. Silence is not the absence of meaning but its rarest form—one that resists articulation. It is not merely a rest from speech but a condition in which truth becomes audible. Noise crowds our minds; silence cleanses them. Silence heals. Human speech, amplified without care, can be the most damaging noise of all. Silence, then, is not luxury—it is necessity. It restores the inner conditions required for speaking with attention. Silence cannot be taught through discourse; it must be experienced. In its stillness, we sense what matters beyond words. We exit the game of linguistic manipulation and enter void. Language creates worlds, but silence reminds us of the cost. To speak is to begin, but to be silent is to let being speak through us. Speaking precedes thinking not only in time but in nature. It arises from the body and the moment, tethered to gesture, breath, and the other. The world is first encountered in sound—whether voiced or hushed—and only later fixed in symbol. Thought does not precede speech. It arises from it.

Conspiracy is consensus

Public opinion often reflects common stereotypes, shifting as data and framing change. What appears to be a shared view is frequently a residue of repeated narratives, dissolving into

entropy as personal viewpoints dissolve into collective information networks. Rather than emerging from deep reflection or genuine consensus, opinion forms around the visible edges of accepted discourse. As Michel Foucault once suggested in 'Symphony in the City', truth is not discovered but fought for—a constant struggle between signal and noise, where every utterance becomes noise to someone. In a world of such communicative overload, synchrony becomes difficult. To align with reality or others, one must choose whether to fight, flee, or simply abide. We do not live in a world of coordinated deception, but of spiralling agreement, where speech turns in on itself, mimicking coherence while accelerating toward disorder. Speech, at its root, is physical. It is sound and vibration—an accident of air and body. Its significance arises not from any intrinsic property, but from the intentions behind it and the collective recognition it receives. Most spoken words are casual and unpremeditated—incidental, circumstantial, and often disposable. They emerge from momentary needs or social habits, not profound truths. These utterances are not signs of conspiracy but the residue of consensus: language that has been edited, conventionalised, and stripped of urgency. Similarly, written language is only meaningful as far as it has been socially accepted. Words on a page are graffiti—signs with no essence unless interpreted. Like images formed by light, written words are arbitrary until a group agrees to treat them as real. Neither objects nor words are static. Art attempts to freeze movement, to capture something that is always changing. But language lives only in its usage, and its stability is a performance—a shared illusion. Meaning is forged through a calculus of social consent.

The goal, however, is not uniformity, but synchronicity. Civilisation thrives not by compelling everyone to think the same, but by enabling different individuals to move in coordinated rhythm. This is the essence of collective resonance—an improvisational harmony that binds people together without dissolving their individuality. In a stadium full of chanting fans, or in a global moment of shared feeling, we see how unity emerges not from coercion but from mutual alignment. The amphitheatre, the screen, the crowd: these are the stages of civilisation’s self-organisation. Such events are not conspiracies—they are moments where consensus achieves temporary balance. And yet, true synchrony cannot be found in noise alone. It requires silence—the pauses between words, the spaces that allow for listening. In silence, we find our tribe. It is not the multitude we seek, but the few with whom our frequencies align. In the quiet, like oxygen to the soul, we recognise the reality around us and the people who truly hear us. Without silence, there is only cacophony—no room for discernment, no space for resonance. The illusion of power in rhetorical mastery must also be questioned. Language that aims to dominate others—through persuasion, manipulation, or spectacle—rarely leads to clarity. Instead, it traps the speaker in a game of appearances, where victory depends on social performance rather than truth. To reject these zero-sum social games—family politics, online mobs, professional gossip—is to reclaim the self. It is an act of unlearning, of making space for thoughts not shaped by external noise. Language becomes meaningful only when it emerges from inward stillness, not reactive chatter.

Our language conditions our perception. The structures of our tongues shape how we think, judge, and relate. But this shaping is also a limitation. Linguistic systems create walls: rules that seem necessary but are in fact contingent. To escape the tyranny of consensus, we must treat language as provisional—every discourse as optional, every name as a choice. Meaning is never fixed, only negotiated. The freedom to name, or to remain silent, is the essence of human dignity. The world is not an abstract totality, but an immediate field of experience.

Maps, platforms, and ideological grids obscure the concrete. To live is to trust what the senses perceive—to see, hear, and feel without mediation. This is not a retreat into subjectivism but a return to the tangible. In the age of simulations and abstractions, disintermediation becomes an ethical act. Reality, in the end, is not what others say it is—it is what you encounter. What is often dismissed as conspiracy—an orchestrated manipulation of language and belief—is in fact consensus: the slow, unconscious sedimentation of shared codes, signs, and permissions. After World War II, the West embraced a consensus shaped not by open debate but by trauma. In fear of the return of fascism, societies accepted a moral and ideological structure based on suspicion of conviction. Like the Olympian gods who ruled to prevent the chaos of the Titans, this new order was accepted because the alternative—ideological catastrophe—was too great a risk. The monstrous twins of Hobbes—Leviathan and Behemoth—still haunt us. Better the bureaucratic state than the horrors of civil war. But this pact came at a cost: language itself became ritualised, and meaning became subordinate to safety.

Truth was no longer something to be pursued, but something to be avoided. Strong convictions were equated with violence. Thus, the vocabulary of politics, education, and culture shifted from affirmation to negation. The old metaphysical certainties—God, nation, family, sex—were displaced by procedural terms: openness, inclusivity, neutrality. A whole new lexicon was constructed not to describe reality, but to replace it. Words no longer pointed to things—they pointed to each other. In this environment, the accusation of 'fascism' became a linguistic ritual. It no longer referred to specific political regimes but to deviations from consensus. Someone who violated the speech codes—by insisting on biological sex, religious truth, or cultural tradition—was branded with the same label once reserved for totalitarian dictators. Language became self-referential. Every utterance was judged not by its truth but by its conformity. Consensus became the ruling deity, and all heretics were those who broke the spell of sanctioned language. Concepts like 'justice', 'democracy', and 'equality' became incantations—used more for effect than substance. To invoke them was to demonstrate loyalty, not to advance understanding. As these words multiplied, their meanings thinned. Their very ubiquity emptied them. This is how entropy enters speech: not through silence, but through excess.

Eventually, even consensus breaks. Words that once held empires together fall into parody. New ones rise, created to signal new virtues, new anxieties. The cycle repeats. Each time it begins again, the linguistic frame becomes more detached from the real. The result is a world governed not by people but by terms—a regime of floating signifiers. Every crisis becomes a problem of language. Every conflict becomes a fight over naming. In such a world, even resistance becomes co-opted. To criticise the system, one must use its language, thereby validating its codes. The more pervasive the consensus, the harder it is to imagine alternatives. This is the tyranny not of force, but of vocabulary. The price of participation is agreement with the terms. But meaning cannot be endlessly recycled. At some point, words lose their power. The symbols cease to function. Then, and only then, can something new be said. In the silence that follows the collapse of consensus, there is space to listen again—not to noise, but to the world. Consensus does not arise from conspiracy but from the repeated use of language that slowly distances itself from reality. Consensus arises from the exhaustion of meaning. The cycle begins in trauma and fear, codifies itself in speech, and sustains itself through repetition and ritual. But as words lose their force, as the symbolic order collapses, what remains is not disorder, but the possibility of truth. In that space, free from noise and rhetorical performance,

speech might recover its meaning—not as manipulation, but as communion. Conspiracy is consensus—but consensus, too, is only temporary.

The quote 'Why look for conspiracy when stupidity can explain so much?' is widely circulated and often misattributed to Napoleon Bonaparte, Robert J. Hanlon, and Goethe. It is a common paraphrase of a broader idea most closely related to Hanlon's Razor, which states: 'Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity'. It is used to emphasise that systemic failure or absurdity does not require a coordinated plot—just human error, incompetence, or systemic dysfunction. Conspiracy and stupidity, though seemingly opposed, are both forms of collective belief—each offering simplified explanations that bind people into shared narratives. This is the answer to the question 'Why look for conspiracy?'—because both are not just explanations, but languages of consensus, tools through which fractured realities are made coherent, if only for a time.

The manufacture of consent

Who can bear the relentless gaze of the crowd? Power evaporates under total exposure. Invisibility is the cloak of sovereignty, and when stripped away—as when Dorothy's house crashes into Oz's illusion—truth dismantles all spectacle. Thus, power must speak before it is questioned. It fabricates consent through discourse, the first and final line of defence. This is not merely persuasion but the architecture of belief. Ruling classes do not need secret plots; they require ruling ideas—concepts and codes that normalise the very structure of dominance. To preserve authority, they manufacture a consensus so total it becomes invisible. Language is not neutral—it is the operating system of power. From the pulpit to the screen, from print to broadcast to algorithm, the voice of power expands its reach, not by force but by scale. The greater the audience, the less individual resistance. Radio, television, and digital media do not just transmit speech; they amplify a singular frame of reality, blending political persuasion with poetic seduction until the boundaries dissolve. Entertainment becomes news, and news becomes ritual. In this rhythm of information, ideology is no longer a proposal—it is a condition. Consent is no longer granted—it is installed.

At its most refined, language aspires to recreate Eden—a mythical state where every word aligned perfectly with its object. This dream of pure language is reborn in every attempt to discipline speech into doctrine. From the Latin 'docere'—to teach—doctrine embeds itself as belief. Through slogans, declarations, and repeated affirmations, language does not inform but indoctrinates. It teaches what must be seen as good, necessary, and inevitable. Every media campaign, political slogan, or cultural cliché becomes a lesson: not 'this might be true' but 'this must be accepted'. As Jacques Derrida pointed out, the highest form of control is not physical but linguistic. Language installs a centre—a transcendental signified—a foundational truth that organises all other meanings. Whether this centre is God, Reason, Democracy, or Progress, it creates a narrative arc, a cosmic grammar that reassures us of a meaningful order. But this order is rhetorical, not real. It satisfies our longing for coherence, not because it reflects the world, but because it silences our fear of chaos.

Structuralism helped expose the mechanisms behind this control. It rejected simplistic binaries—good/evil, right/wrong—and showed how meaning is constructed through oppositions within systems. Saussure argued that words are not natural signs but arbitrary constructions. The link between a word (signifier) and its meaning (signified) is purely conventional. There is no divine language. After Babel, we lost access to absolute meaning. All

that remains is convention—language as a network of relational differences. Meaning is not discovered; it is produced through contrast. Words function only within this web of relations. Language is not a mirror of the world but a grid imposed upon it. Every sentence is an act of shaping reality, not describing it. Meaning arises not from essence but from context. It is not the thing itself but the position a word occupies within the system that determines its value. This system is the deep structure, the abstract code. What we say is only a surface act, a local performance bounded by this underlying order.

Conventions are the infrastructure of understanding. But they are also fragile. From the Latin 'convenire'—to come together—convention implies agreement. Yet what is agreed upon can be just as easily manipulated. Law, religion, literature—all rest on mutable conventions. Those who write the rules reserve the right to break them. Coded language, double meanings, legal fictions, and political euphemisms all point to the same truth: language can be used to clarify or to conceal, to include or exclude, to affirm or betray. Throughout history, speech has been used both to bind and to sever. It promises clarity but delivers confusion. It claims transparency while hiding motive. In times of institutional collapse, when structures lose their grip, the consensus they supported does not vanish—it mutates. It continues to speak, even after it has lost meaning. It sustains itself by sheer momentum, by the ritual repetition of signs long since emptied of referents. Structuralism, then, does not merely dismantle meaning. It reveals how meaning is never singular, never stable. It is the result of systems—systems that can be shaped, controlled, and rewritten. Language is not a window onto the world. It is scaffolding. It frames what we are allowed to see. It unites when controlled, and sows confusion when it collapses. But in either case, it is never neutral.

The most enduring systems are those that make themselves invisible. When ideology becomes language itself—when the consensus is embedded in how we speak, in what we believe to be obvious—then resistance becomes unintelligible. To oppose the consensus, one must first exit its vocabulary. But how does one speak outside language? That is the dilemma of the dissident. Silence becomes the last refuge. To escape is not necessarily to speak differently but to speak less. Not passive muteness, but deliberate non-participation. A speechlessness that refuses to affirm the given terms of debate. In that silence lies the potential for agency—not to invent new words but to wait for language to become possible again. As Roland Barthes wrote, we fabricate meaning and consensus together. But we also fabricate illusions. And sometimes the only escape is refusal. The structure of language precedes all individual thought. Its architecture is vertical—an invisible system of value and contrast. But our lived speech—is horizontal, diachronic, and syntactic. Every utterance is a performance within a coded world. True poetic language breaks these codes. It plays with them, exposes them, and reconfigures them. Propaganda does the opposite—it uses the system to enforce obedience. Poetry resists; propaganda reinscribes. And yet even poetry is vulnerable. It too circulates within networks of power. Its intelligibility depends on a shared code. A poem that cannot be understood is simply noise. It is not enough to resist. One must resist intelligibly, and that often means re-entering the very system one seeks to reject. Language traps even its critics.

The aphorism of Giambattista Vico—Verum esse ipsum factum—'truth is itself something made'—signals a profound shift in epistemology. Truth is not discovered; it is constructed. Language does not reveal reality—it manufactures it. Constructivism opposes the Cartesian ideal that reason reveals the world. Instead, it argues that we only understand what we ourselves have built. Nature remains alien. It is mechanics—our artificial constructions—

that reveal more than nature itself. Vico's 'ricorso', the cycle of return, suggests that this manufacture is not linear. Languages collapse. Meaning exhausts itself. The tower of Babel rises, crumbles, and rises again. Consensus does not endure through clarity but through repetition, habit, and the exhaustion of alternatives. At some point, people stop believing, but they continue speaking. And then the consensus manufactures itself—an animal agreement not of reason, but of breath. A shared inhalation that precedes speech. An unspoken vow to continue living together, not through dialogue, but through proximity. This is not a rational consensus. It is pre-linguistic consent. Not the result of deliberation but of cohabitation. Neighbours understand more in silence than adversaries do in debate. Words divide. Proximity unites. The consensus at the end of language is not the triumph of truth, but the affirmation of survival. Consensus arises when the conspiracy of language collapses—when meaning is exhausted and the tower of babble falls. What follows is not reasoned agreement, but a conspiracy of silence: an unspoken, animal pact to live and breathe together. More is understood through silent coexistence than through endless speech. 'Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality', said Joseph Conrad. True harmony begins not in dialogue, but in dwelling together as brothers beyond the noise of words. The manufacture of consent begins as a conspiracy of speech and ends as a consensus of silence. When meaning fails, it is not truth that binds us, but the quiet collective decision to endure and belong together without words.

'If I have ever had these gifts in any sort of living form they have been smothered out of existence a long time ago under a wilderness of words. Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality. I have been for many years a teacher of languages. It is an occupation which at length becomes fatal to whatever share of imagination, observation, and insight an ordinary person may be heir to. To a teacher of languages there comes a time when the world is but a place of many words and man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot'.

— Joseph Conrad, Under Western Eyes

2. CONSPIRACIES

2.1. Facts, biases, and hegemony

'Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'.

— Louis Althusser, Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses

'What we call facts are already interpretations'.

— Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Facts

(When truth meets trust: The limits of facts)

Facts alone rarely persuade; they collide with our biases, identities, and social bonds. As Varol shows, objective data must be wrapped in dignity and psychological safety to be heard. Friendships then provide the trust bridge—beliefs shift not through debate but through relationships that humanise 'the other'. Moral convictions bend our perception of outcomes, aligning 'what is' with 'what ought to be'. Even the fact-checkers themselves operate within contested moral and political landscapes, reminding us that no arbiter of truth is beyond scrutiny. Ultimately, changing minds demands more than evidence: it calls for empathy, humility, and ongoing dialogue across divides. In a polarised world, our greatest asset is not better facts, but better connections.

Facts don't change minds[35]

In 'Facts Don't Change Minds. Here's What Does'(2017) Ozan Varol argue with the widely held belief that the best way to change someone's mind is to offer clear, objective facts. For a long time, this rationalist approach dominated public discourse: if only people had access to the correct information, they would update their beliefs accordingly. Yet time and experience have shown that this rarely happens. Facts, no matter how well-reasoned or data-driven, often fail to penetrate entrenched worldviews. As John Adams once said, 'Facts are stubborn things', but people's minds are far more resistant. The reason lies in a well-documented psychological phenomenon: confirmation bias. People naturally seek out information that supports what they already believe, while ignoring or dismissing contradictory evidence. This mental filter reinforces existing positions and shields identity from cognitive dissonance. Attempts to refute someone's position by presenting overwhelming data often backfire, making them more defensive and more convinced of their prior beliefs. To engage meaningfully and provoke actual change, one must appeal to more than logic. Offer the other person a way out that preserves dignity: Frame the shift in terms of updated information rather than past error. Allowing people to revise views without shame or blame creates psychological safety. Uncouple beliefs from identity: The more people see their ideas as extensions of their personal worth, the less likely they are to abandon them. Subtle linguistic shifts can reduce ego attachment and open the door to revision. Understand the listener's values: Instead of restating your case louder or more often, tune your message to their concerns. Climate change facts might not move a factory worker worried about job security—but a story about green energy creating jobs for future generations might. Changing minds requires changing frames, not just repeating facts. Escape the echo chamber: Most people curate their media and relationships to avoid discomfort. Yet growth requires contact with the unfamiliar. Seek out dissenting voices, befriend those who challenge your perspective, and read opposing viewpoints not to dismiss but to learn. Intellectual humility

[35] Ozan Varol. (2017). Facts don't change people's minds. Here's what does. [online] Available at: https://ozanvarol.com/how-to-change-a-mind-yours-or-someone-elses/.

is nourished in the friction between competing ideas. Facts alone do not change minds—but humility, listening, and trust can. In an age saturated with information, there is no need for more data, but more grace in how people speak and listen.

Friendships can change our minds

In the article[36] 'Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds—Friendships Do' human beings are seen not simply rational calculators, weighing facts in pursuit of truth. While reason plays a role in shaping beliefs, social belonging often plays a greater one. As economist J.K. Galbraith once remarked, most people would rather defend their beliefs than revise them—even in the face of overwhelming evidence. The desire to be right is powerful, but the desire to belong is even stronger. People cling to ideas not only because they believe them to be true, but because those ideas bind them to communities and relationships. Throughout history, bad ideas have persisted not because they are persuasive, but because they are socially useful. Conspicuous beliefs are signals of group loyalty. When someone repeats a falsehood, it may not be a sign of ignorance, but of allegiance. It is less about the content of the belief and more about what it communicates: 'I am one of you'. If adopting a belief secures social approval, the brain will accept it—regardless of whether it is true. This is why facts often fail to change minds. When people are presented with evidence that challenges their worldview, they experience it not as information, but as an attack on their identity. To revise a belief is to risk losing one's tribe. In this context, friendship becomes more powerful than logic. A person is far more likely to reconsider their position if the suggestion comes from someone they already trust, someone within their social world. We change not through argument, but through relationship. Friendships offer the emotional safety required for transformation. Spending time with someone who disagrees with you can soften prejudice and open space for understanding. This proximity humanises the other and undermines caricature. The process of belief change is incremental. People do not leap across ideological spectrums; they slide, often influenced by those already close to them. Books and quiet conversations are often more effective than debates, because they allow people to reflect without the need to defend their ego. A book does not argue—it waits. A friend does not attack—they invite. Ideas, both good and bad, spread through repetition. Most people behave like soldiers, trying to win arguments. The real victory lies in connection, not conversion. Changing minds is not a matter of being right—it is a matter of being kind first. The truth rarely wins through force. It travels on the fragile bridge of trust, built slowly, and carried by friendship.

Moral evaluations shape factual beliefs

According to research[37] by Brittany Liu and Peter H. Ditto 'What Dilemma? How Moral Evaluations Shape Factual Beliefs', people often sidestep moral dilemmas altogether by unconsciously aligning their perception of facts with their moral convictions. Moral dilemmas—whether in philosophy classrooms or real-world political debates—are often presented as stark choices between principles and outcomes. Should one sacrifice a single life to save many? Should society condone capital punishment if it might deter crime? These conflicts between deontological and consequentialist reasoning appear to demand a difficult

[36] Clear, J. (2018). James Clear. [online] James Clear. Available at: https://jamesclear.com/why-facts-dont-change-minds.

[37] Liu, B.S. and Ditto, P.H. (2012). What Dilemma? Moral Evaluation Shapes Factual Belief. Social Psychological and Personality Science, 4(3), pp.316–323. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550612456045.

choice between moral duty and practical outcome. Across three studies, they found that individuals routinely reshape their understanding of consequences to fit their moral beliefs. If a person believes a particular action is inherently wrong, they are also more likely to believe that the action will have negative outcomes. Conversely, if someone morally endorses an act, they will tend to view it as more beneficial and less harmful—even if objective evidence is lacking or contradictory. The first study used the classic trolley problem to examine how people judged the morality and efficacy of pushing one person to save five. Those who believed the action was morally wrong also rated it as more harmful and less effective. The second study extended this logic to real-world issues like capital punishment and stem cell research. Participants who found these acts immoral also believed they were less effective or more harmful, even in the absence of strong empirical data. The third study demonstrated that this causal relationship could be manipulated: reading moral arguments for or against capital punishment shifted participants' beliefs about its consequences, even when those consequences were never directly discussed. These results reveal a deep-seated human tendency toward 'motivated consequentialism'—the psychological alignment of facts with values. The process serves to reduce internal conflict. Instead of enduring the discomfort of a moral dilemma, individuals adjust the perceived facts to fit their convictions, reinforcing moral coherence and simplifying decision-making. This is not necessarily dishonest or deliberate but reflects how the mind naturally seeks harmony between belief and evidence. Importantly, the alignment was stronger among those with high moral conviction, greater self-reported knowledge, and conservative political leanings. This suggests that people with firmer worldviews may be especially susceptible to letting moral beliefs shape their sense of what is true. Yet the phenomenon is not limited to any one ideology; the mechanism applies broadly across the moral spectrum.

Who will check the fact-checkers?

Fact-checkers occupy a crucial role in modern information ecosystems, serving as mediators between public discourse and verifiable reality. Their mission is to identify misinformation, provide context, and promote accurate understanding. However, as with any authority tasked with evaluating truth claims, fact-checkers must themselves be subject to scrutiny. The question 'Who will police the policemen?' underscores the importance of ensuring transparency, accountability, and public oversight in the fact-checking process. The most reliable safeguard against misuse of authority is not blind trust, but critical engagement, methodological openness, and institutional plurality. A central concern in discussions of fact-checkers is political bias. While leading organisations maintain public commitments to neutrality, allegations of bias persist. Research reveals that perceptions of bias often depend more on the political orientation of the audience than on demonstrable evidence. Some studies found fact-checkers may appear biased simply because some political groups make more false claims. Other analyses suggest that the decision to focus on topics or public figures—rather than inaccuracies themselves—can create an impression of selectivity or agenda-driven coverage. These suspicions are further inflamed by concerns over funding and institutional affiliations. Many fact-checkers receive grants from philanthropic foundations, some of which are publicly associated with political ideologies. Partnerships with major tech firms like Facebook and Google have also provoked anxiety about potential corporate influence. In response, numerous organisations disclose their funding sources and maintain editorial independence protocols. Nevertheless, transparency alone does not immunise them from the risk of unconscious bias or institutional pressure. Criticism of fact-checkers emerges from both ends of the political spectrum. In the U.S., conservatives often argue that fact-checking disproportionately targets right-wing narratives, while some progressive voices charge fact-

checkers with promoting false equivalence to maintain a facade of balance. These criticisms point less to outright dishonesty than to the deeper structural challenge of operating in a polarised media environment where trust itself has become ideological. The result is an overconfidence in premature conclusions and insufficient humility about uncertainty.

Biases

(From Echo Chambers to Polarisation: Deep-rooted cognitive biases)

Biases lie at the heart of our fragmented discourse, subtly steering what we notice, how we interpret evidence, and which voices we trust. Myside bias cements our views by filtering reality through identity-drenched lenses, while the 'peak bullshit' of post-truth communication rides emotional currents to bypass critical scrutiny. Even 'truthful' signals can mislead when they are costless cheap talk rather than genuine costly signals of credibility. Together, these dynamics erode shared reality and fuel polarisation. Yet awareness of these forces empowers us to pause, question our first impressions, and seek out disconfirming evidence. By deliberately exposing ourselves to diverse perspectives—and demanding clearer, more accountable signals—we can begin to bridge divides and rebuild a healthier public square grounded not just in facts, but in mutual understanding and trust.

The bias that divides us

In his book[38] 'The Bias That Divides Us' Keith E. Stanovich explores myside bias, a deeply ingrained cognitive tendency, that leads people to interpret, search for, and recall information in a way that reinforces their preexisting beliefs. Unlike temporary misunderstandings or gaps in knowledge, this bias is pervasive, enduring, and resistant to education, intelligence, or ideological moderation. It shapes the very core of how individuals evaluate facts and form judgments—whether in politics, science, law, or everyday life. What makes myside bias especially problematic is its universality: it affects liberals and conservatives, the educated and uneducated, scientists and laypeople alike. This phenomenon has been repeatedly demonstrated. In early studies from the 1950s college students watched the same football game and disagreed about who committed more fouls. Each group saw the same footage but reported infractions differently, depending on their allegiance. Later experiments replicated this effect in political contexts. Myside bias differs from similar-sounding concepts like confirmation bias or belief bias. Confirmation bias describes the search for evidence in favour of a particular hypothesis, and belief bias involves rejecting logical conclusions that contradict prior knowledge. But 'myside bias' is more deeply rooted. It concerns emotionally charged beliefs tied to identity—political ideology, religious conviction, or moral values. These are not easily swayed by logic or empirical counterarguments, because they serve social and psychological functions beyond truth-seeking. Modern research demonstrates the power of myside bias in shaping judgments on risk, morality, and political behaviour. When people support a policy, they tend to view its risks as minimal and its benefits as large. When they oppose it, the same policy suddenly seems dangerous and ineffective. In studies of alcohol consumption, climate change, or gun control, people downplay or emphasise risks in ways that match their values rather than the data. In politics, the bias is even more apparent. People evaluate identical actions more favourably when carried out by someone from their own party. In argument evaluations, individuals consistently rate statements supporting their views as more

[38] Stanovich, K.E. (2021). The bias that divides us : the science and politics of myside thinking. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Mit Press.

logical and coherent—even when objectively they are not. When asked to generate reasons for or against an issue, people overwhelmingly produce arguments that favour their own position, even when instructed to be neutral. Because the bias is linked to core identity structures, rational persuasion often fails to overcome it.

Post-truth and peak bullshit

In 'Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do About It' Evan Davis[39] identifies a central crisis of contemporary public life: the dominance of bullshit. In an era where emotional resonance frequently overrides factual accuracy this is not simply about lying; it is about the widespread prevalence of insincere, manipulative, or vague communication—often crafted by professionals in politics, media, and corporate messaging. The result is a culture in which words serve persuasion more than explanation, and clarity is sacrificed for effect. Davis situates this phenomenon in a longer tradition of rhetorical manipulation but warns that the contemporary moment has reached a saturation point—what he terms 'peak bullshit'. Davis traces this rise through several cultural and political shifts. In a 2013, after the end of the world in 2012 that did not happen, the post-truth era was born. In this environment, falsehoods are not simply tolerated—they are often celebrated as bold or authentic. From bizarre scientific claims to viral internet hoaxes, the breakdown of shared reality became a political tool and a cultural style. What makes post-truth communication different is that it does not merely avoid the truth—it renders truth irrelevant. Its power lies in emotional appeal, tribal loyalty, and the ability to reaffirm what audiences already feel or suspect. Social media platforms, with their incentives for virality and outrage, only amplify the problem. But this is not a sudden rupture. It builds on long-standing practices of exaggeration, marketing, and propaganda. The bullshit of the present, then, is not unprecedented—it is merely more aggressive, more visible, and more effective. Bullshit is any communication that is not the clearest and most sincere reflection of one has reasonably held beliefs. Unlike traditional lies, which are deliberate untruths, bullshit often operates in a zone of ambiguity, dressed in inflated rhetoric, misleading framing, or evasive generalities. Even well-meaning exaggeration or diplomatic phrasing can fall into this category. Sometimes, bullshit oils the wheels of human interaction. But its unrestrained use—particularly by those in power—undermines trust and the capacity for informed judgment. Why does bullshit flourish? Because it works. It simplifies, flatters, reassures, and energises. It aligns with the cognitive biases people already have. If audiences respond positively to emotional cues rather than rational scrutiny, bullshit will remain a dominant mode of public speech. However, its success comes at a cost: a degraded public sphere, a sceptical citizenry, and a culture of suspicion toward any claim of expertise or objectivity.

Why is there so much bullshit?

In an age saturated with soundbites, slogans, spin, and social media outrage, a fundamental question arises: why is there so much bullshit? Evan Davis, drawing on his background in economics and broadcasting, approaches this not as a rhetorical lament, but as a genuine inquiry into the mechanics and psychology of modern communication. The answer lies not just in the manipulative nature of those who spread nonsense, but in the incentives, institutions, and habits that reward it—and in the audience that tolerates or even embraces it. Economics teaches that information asymmetry distorts markets. Sellers know more than

[39] Davis, E. (2018). Post-truth : peak bullshit and what we can do about it. London: Abacus.

buyers and often have incentives to obscure truths. Yet economic models typically assume rational actors—people who detect and reject deception when it appears. Reality, however, proves far messier. Despite the glaring transparency of much modern bullshit, people still fall for it—or, more commonly, ignore its implausibility altogether. Why? Because bullshit often serves functions beyond truth: it flatters, simplifies, comforts, or signals allegiance. And sometimes, even if no one is convinced by it, bullshit persists because the system rewards its use. Consider the phrase, 'Your call is important to us'. Everyone knows it is empty. No one believes it. But its repetition serves as a placeholder—filler noise to maintain the illusion of care. Advertising slogans operate similarly: nobody truly believes 'A Mars a Day Helps You Work, Rest and Play', but the rhythmic message still nudges behaviour. In any regime, propaganda endures not because it convinced citizens, but because it reinforced a system that required public compliance. Even blank pamphlets, as in one ironic protest, could speak volumes—everyone knew the truth without needing words. Bullshit, then, is not only about convincing. It can be about occupying space, projecting intention, or avoiding silence. It becomes habit, a default, often accepted because real frankness is hard, risky, or socially discouraged. Nearly everyone engages in minor forms of bullshit embedded in everyday interaction. In the post-truth age, the problem has evolved. Bullshit is no longer just a layer of varnish over fact. Now, emotional appeal and ideological loyalty often matter more than accuracy. Falsehoods circulate freely online, amplified by confirmation bias and platform algorithms. This new strain of bullshit thrives in environments where people want their beliefs affirmed, not challenged, and where the line between satire, propaganda, and misinformation is intentionally blurred. Facts still matter—but they do not float in the public sphere as independent, unassailable truths. They require interpretation, trust, and contextual judgment. As Evan Davis notes, it is not only about whether something is true, but how heavily it weighs in decision-making.

The spectrum of mendacity

Outright lies represent only one end of a broader continuum of deception. At the other end lies a more insidious, subtler form of mendacity. In today’s information-saturated environment, this quieter breed of deception is both more common and more corrosive, precisely because it masquerades as factual. In some societies, the social and legal penalties for lying are high. Consequently, many public figures have mastered the art of avoiding lies while still distorting truth. They use techniques such as omission, selective framing, euphemism, and exaggerated emphasis. These tactics, though less blatant, often prove just as misleading—while remaining harder to challenge or expose. This form of truth manipulation reveals a dysfunctional relationship with facts. The goal is not to inform or describe reality, but to persuade, obscure, or redirect attention. These deceptions operate under the cover of factual language, using truth as a tool for distortion. This pattern is a defining feature of the post-truth era, where facts are bent just enough to suit emotional or ideological narratives without triggering formal accusations of lying. To better understand how these distortions function, one can turn to economics and its study of information. For decades, economists have analysed how communication works in environments of unequal knowledge—what they call 'asymmetric information'. These studies focus less on deception and more on what makes a message credible. Surprisingly, while economists avoid the term 'bullshit', they have developed sophisticated theories that explain when and why people believe (or doubt) what others say. A central figure in this field is Michael Spence, whose 1972 thesis, 'Market Signaling', introduced the idea that people send 'signals'—costly, hard-to-fake actions—to convey unobservable qualities. This idea has profound implications for understanding deception. It explains why simply stating

something—especially something self-serving—is not usually enough to convince others. Words are cheap. But when someone takes a costly action that supports their claim, the signal becomes more credible. That is why companies spend millions on brand advertising or why a firm might offer generous return policies: these are costly signals that express confidence. In contrast, much modern communication is 'cheap talk'—low-cost, unverifiable claims. Because these carry no penalty for dishonesty, they are easy to fake and thus often discounted. This is where subtle mendacity flourishes: when signals are not costly enough to distinguish sincerity from manipulation. Economists have tried to reconcile this gap with concepts like 'babbling equilibrium', where communication continues even when content lacks meaning or relevance. However, this still does not account for why bullshit sometimes persuades people, influences elections, sells products, or creates public panic. People are not just truth-seekers—they are also emotional, tribal, and often motivated by identity rather than evidence.

Hegemony

(From grammar to governance: How words construct and contest power)

For Gramsci language is far more than a neutral conduit: it is the very terrain on which power is won and maintained. Through everyday speech, standardised norms, and the work of organic intellectuals, ruling groups secure consent by embedding their worldview in 'common sense'. Yet this same linguistic field offers avenues for resistance: subaltern voices can forge alternative grammars, reinterpret meanings, and cultivate counter-hegemonic discourse. By tracing the historical sediments within each word and recognising how normative and spontaneous grammars interact, we see that transforming society begins with transforming language itself. In this light, political struggle is inseparable from cultural and linguistic struggle—challenging hegemony requires not only new arguments but new vocabularies and narratives that reshape what is taken for granted.

Language and hegemony in Gramsci

In 'Language and Hegemony in Gramsci' Peter Ives[40] explores the centrality of language in Antonio Gramsci's 'Prison Notebooks'. His concept of hegemony—where domination is secured not merely by force but through cultural consent—has since shaped debates in Marxism, poststructuralism, cultural studies, and political theory. Peter Ives argues that Gramsci's engagement with language is not incidental, but essential to understanding the mechanics of consent and power in modern societies. Gramsci redefined hegemony as a process by which ruling classes establish moral and intellectual leadership over subordinate groups, not only through institutions of coercion but via cultural and linguistic norms. His emphasis on everyday practices, education, and common sense reveals how language is a tool through which ideology is normalised and internalised. Unlike the traditional Marxist focus on economic determinism, Gramsci paid close attention to how language both reflects and produces power. His study of the Italian language, especially its standardisation, became a model for analysing how linguistic practices function within larger hegemonic systems. Language, for Gramsci, was never abstract—it was grounded in the concrete realities of education, social class, and cultural institutions. His theory of the 'organic intellectual' is key here: intellectuals are not detached elites, but individuals embedded within and expressing the worldview of their class. Thus, linguistic struggle becomes class struggle, and grammar becomes a battlefield for ideology.

[40]Ives, P. (2004). Language and hegemony in Gramsci. London ; Ann Arbor, Mi: Pluto Press.

Gramsci's understanding of discourse shows how political identity and antagonism are constructed through language, reinforcing the idea that discourse shapes reality rather than simply reflecting it. Language is not just a medium of communication, but a terrain of struggle, where the definitions of truth, authority, and legitimacy are contested.

Language and social theory

By situating Gramsci within a broader tradition of linguistic thought, we see how his political theory was shaped by, and contributed to, the evolving understanding of language as a force in social life. The twentieth century witnessed a transformation in how language was conceptualised in relation to material production and political power. The rise of information economies, digital communication, and symbolic labour blurred the boundary between intellectual and manual work. This shift was not only technological but ideological: language itself became a site of production and contestation. In the realm of mass democracy, where persuasion and cultural consent are central to maintaining order, language emerged as a key medium through which political power is exercised and resisted. Gramsci responded to this new configuration by developing his theory of hegemony, which explains how dominant groups maintain control not merely through coercion but by shaping cultural norms, institutions, and everyday language. For Gramsci, understanding how people speak, think, and make sense of their world was essential to grasping how consent is manufactured and sustained. The lineage of these ideas goes through the first major linguistic turn in social theory: structuralism. Ferdinand de Saussure's 'Course in General Linguistics' introduced the view of language as a system of signs structured by internal relations. Saussure emphasised a synchronic (present-focused) approach over a diachronic (historical) one, redefining language as 'langue' (the abstract system) and 'parole' (individual utterance). His concept of the arbitrary sign—comprising a signifier and signified bound only by convention—laid the foundation for structuralist analysis in anthropology, semiotics, and cultural studies. Saussure's ideas influenced Claude Lévi-Strauss, who applied structuralist methods to myths and kinship systems, and Louis Althusser, who recast Marxist theory by analysing how ideological institutions produce subjectivity. Both saw language and symbolic systems not merely as reflections of material life but as constitutive of social relations themselves. Jacques Lacan brought this structuralist insight into psychoanalysis, claiming the unconscious is structured like a language. For Lacan, identity and desire are mediated by symbolic orders, and language becomes the very condition for human subjectivity. This further solidified the view that meaning, identity, and ideology are not external to language but formed through it. Gramsci absorbed many of these insights, though he remained politically grounded. His concern was not abstract theory but how linguistic practices in education, religion, and media shape common sense and naturalise power. Unlike later poststructuralists, Gramsci retained a materialist concern with class, struggle, and historical specificity. Gramsci's work as a pivotal contribution to a tradition that understands language as both a mirror and a maker of social order.

Language as a tool for hegemony

Gramsci's theory of hegemony places language at the heart of political and cultural domination. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a vehicle through which dominant ideologies are transmitted, normalised, and internalised. Language embeds worldviews and functions as a medium through which power organises consent. Through everyday speech and cultural discourse, dominant groups shape what is understood as 'common sense'—a body of beliefs that appears natural and self-evident but is, in fact, ideologically constructed. Subaltern groups, those marginalised in power structures, often adopt these

dominant conceptions unknowingly. This is not due to manipulation alone but to the fragmented and incoherent nature of their own worldviews. Gramsci argues that individuals always belong to a particular social grouping, and when their conception of the world is uncritical or episodic, they unknowingly internalise elements from multiple ideological systems, often contradictory. Without a coherent language or philosophy to express their own interests, subaltern groups remain ideologically subordinate and politically disorganised. Gramsci also connects language to national unity and political legitimacy. He writes that when the 'question of language' emerges, it always signals deeper struggles: the consolidation of ruling groups, the need to expand governance, and the cultural alignment between elites and the masses. Language thus becomes a marker of political consolidation, class dominance, and the spread of hegemonic values. Beyond its communicative function, Gramsci treats language as a metaphorical model for social and political systems. In his 'Prison Notebooks', especially the twenty-ninth, he suggests that grammatical rules and linguistic structure can be seen as metaphors for how consent is organised in society. Language becomes a map of cultural processes: shaped by history, sedimented with meanings, and structured by power. He likens language to a 'museum of fossils', where every word carries traces of previous epochs and ideologies. Meaning emerges from the internal structure and relational dynamics of language itself. Language operates metaphorically not just at the level of individual words but at the systemic level—linking ideas, shaping thought, and guiding behaviour in ways that reinforce ideological hierarchies. Language is both a repository of past worldviews and a battlefield for present ideological struggles. It offers the means through which power is maintained—but also the potential through which it may be contested and transformed.

Metaphor and hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's theory of language reimagines it not merely as a tool for communication but as a metaphorical expression of cultural and political hegemony. For him, language is a social battlefield, where ideology is not simply transmitted but embodied in its structure. It carries the imprint of historical power struggles and reflects the shifting dynamics of dominance and consent. Language changes with transformations in civilisation, absorbing the influence of rising social groups while maintaining the imprint of dominant ones. This process often results in one language or dialect asserting itself over others, not through merit, but through the consolidation of cultural power. Gramsci draws a parallel between grammar and political authority. He distinguishes between spontaneous grammar, which emerges organically from lived experience, and normative grammar, which is imposed by institutions to define what is considered correct or prestigious. Spontaneous grammar reflects the diversity of local cultures and everyday speech, while normative grammar consolidates control by elevating certain forms over others. When elites promote one dialect—such as the Florentine variety in Italy—as a national standard, it serves as a symbolic act of domination, masquerading as unification. Instead of embracing this centralisation, Gramsci calls for a democratic integration of diverse grammars as a cultural strategy for resistance. Crucial to this theory is the insistence on language's historicity. Unlike structuralist approaches that abstract language into static systems, Gramsci sees each word as a historical artefact, bearing the ideological weight of previous epochs. Words are shaped by former uses, battles of meaning, and civilisational shifts; they do not merely refer to things but carry traces of the social contexts in which they once operated. This layered view of language reveals that hegemony is not a permanent state but a continuous process of negotiation and adaptation. Just as language evolves through metaphor and absorption, so too does political consensus. Language thus becomes both a lens and a lever—an instrument for understanding how power embeds itself in everyday life and a space

where alternative cultural logics can emerge. Through the contestation of language itself, new grammars of social meaning can be forged, offering a method for challenging dominance and reimagining collective life.

2.2. Conspiracy speech

(Shadow narratives: Language, authority, and rhetorical arsenal)

'The hallmark of a conspiracy theory is that it is ultimately irrefutable'.

— Cass Sunstein & Adrian Vermeule, Conspiracy Theories

'Suspicion is the dialect of the powerless'.

— Luc Boltanski, Distant Suffering

'The conspiracy theory becomes a closed system, one that converts all opposition into further evidence of the plot'.

— Michael Barkun, A Culture of Conspiracy

Linguistic theory of conspiracy

A conspiracy is a secret agreement between individuals or groups to commit an unlawful or harmful act. What distinguishes it from ordinary secrecy is its coordinated intent to deceive or disrupt social, political, or institutional orders. Whether involving treason, corruption, or covert sabotage, conspiracies are defined by their clandestine nature and shared purpose. They operate in the shadows not merely for protection, but to ensure cohesion and trust among the conspirators, maintaining their shared narrative while excluding the broader public. Secrecy, in this context, is not a side effect but a necessary condition of the collective act. The word 'conspiracy' comes from the Latin 'conspiratio', meaning 'to breathe together'. This etymology reveals the essential function of conspiracy: to create an exclusive form of unity, an enclosed network of shared intention. It is language turned inward—covert communication that binds insiders and excludes outsiders. In this sense, a conspiracy is more than an act; it is a linguistic structure. It functions by aligning meaning, belief, and trust within a closed group, often with the purpose of challenging or manipulating an external system of authority. This logic is echoed in conspiracy theories. These narratives posit that powerful, unseen forces orchestrate major events behind the scenes. Unlike actual conspiracies, which may eventually be exposed, conspiracy theories are resistant to refutation. Any evidence against them is reabsorbed into the theory itself, reinforcing its logic. Conspiracy theories thus become self-contained, belief-driven systems that mirror the closed unity of actual conspiracies—creating strong internal consensus among believers. Cognitive biases help explain why conspiracy theories persist. In times of fear or uncertainty, they offer emotionally resonant explanations. For those who feel alienated or powerless, conspiracy theories create a sense of clarity and belonging. They become cultural narratives that simplify chaos into moral drama—offering not just a belief, but a community. The rapid spread of conspiracy theories via digital media, coupled with the erosion of institutional trust, has made them more potent than ever. They create an internal

language of truth, often at odds with public consensus. This brings us to a deeper insight: the structural goal of both conspiracy and conspiracy theory is consensus. The act of conspiracy depends on absolute internal trust and agreement—without this, the secrecy collapses. Similarly, conspiracy theories work by generating consensus among believers, turning the extraordinary and unbelievable into a coherent worldview. This mirrors the fundamental purpose of language itself: to generate shared meaning, foster coordination, and build communal understanding. Language, conspiracy, and conspiracy theory all aim at the same end—consensus. Whether it is a cabal whispering in secret or a group online sharing suspicions, the goal is to construct a common belief, to align minds. In this sense, conspiracy is not a deviation from linguistic order but an intensification of it. It exposes how language can bind tightly, even dangerously, when it seeks not openness or plurality, but absolute internal agreement.

Taking conspiracy culture seriously

In 'Taking Conspiracy Culture Seriously: Journalism's Epistemological Challenge[41]' Juliette De Maeyer argues that conspiracy culture has become an unavoidable part of public discourse. Whether in casual conversations, online forums, or public protests, conspiracy narratives shape how many people perceive journalism, politics, and truth itself. These views are no longer confined to fringe communities. Surveys suggest that a significant portion of the population subscribes to conspiratorial beliefs about major events, driven not only by misinformation but by a deeper mistrust in institutions—including journalism. Conspiracy culture should not be dismissed as mere irrationality; it reflects a growing scepticism toward conventional sources of knowledge and calls into question the very foundations of how information is produced, validated, and circulated. At the heart of conspiracy thinking is the belief that hidden forces manipulate public perception. This worldview has historical roots in modernity's obsession with unveiling secret networks and invisible power. From 19th-century detective fiction to 20th-century cybernetic models, the notion that everything is connected and that surface appearances conceal deeper realities has gained cultural legitimacy. As systems of governance and media grew more complex, so too did the public's appetite for explanations that could pierce the opacity of modern life. Conspiracy thinking emerged as a response to this complexity, offering emotionally satisfying explanations in place of institutional ambiguity. Journalism finds itself in an epistemological dilemma. On the surface, its investigative methods—digging for facts, questioning official narratives, exposing corruption—mirror those of conspiracy theorists. Yet where journalism aspires to evidence-based verification, conspiracism indulges in speculative coherence. This overlap exposes a troubling paradox: conspiracy culture mimics journalism's ideals while rejecting its authority. The problem deepens as journalism's traditional claim to objectivity is increasingly challenged by both critical theory and public cynicism. Objectivity, once defined as separating fact from opinion, is now viewed by some as a rhetorical device rather than a guarantee of truth. Meanwhile, conspiracy culture exploits the same language of doubt and critique, turning it against journalism itself. This dual erosion—from postmodern critique and conspiratorial suspicion—forces journalism to reconsider its epistemological framework. What counts as a fact? Who determines its legitimacy? Can journalism still serve as a credible witness to reality in an age when both its methods and motives are under constant suspicion? Rather than retreating into

[41] De Maeyer, J. (2018). Taking conspiracy culture seriously: Journalism needs to face its epistemological trouble. Journalism, 20(1), pp.21–23. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918807037.

defensive objectivity or dismissing conspiracy theories as irrational noise, journalism must engage these questions head-on. This involves admitting that facts are constructed through processes—interviews, documents, verification—but that this construction does not equal fabrication. It means acknowledging that the truth is often provisional, incomplete, and fragile—yet still worth pursuing with discipline and transparency. The problem is not with the conspiracy culture but with journalism.

Religious studies of conspiracy theories

In 'The Hidden Hand: Why Religious Studies Need to Take Conspiracy Theories Seriously[42]' David G. Robertson inquires the intersection of religion and conspiracy theory as a crucial area, particularly in an era marked by political polarisation, populist rhetoric, and increasing public suspicion toward established institutions. Long treated as a marginal or even distasteful subject in academic circles, conspiracy culture has become too prominent to ignore. From the religiously inflected language to the apocalyptic visions conspiracy narratives are often interwoven with theological motifs and eschatological expectations. This is not a fringe curiosity but a mainstream phenomenon deserving serious scholarly engagement within religious studies and the wider social sciences. Conspiracy thinking and religious belief share several structural features. Both often rely on a teleological view of history, the presence of hidden agents or forces, and an interpretive framework in which contradictions are resolved not by refutation but by deeper initiation. Conspiracies offer moral clarity and an explanation of evil, much like religious theodicy. They appeal to an epistemology of suspicion, where official narratives are seen as concealments rather than explanations. This convergence is especially visible in New Age and millennialist subcultures, where failed prophecies often give rise to elaborate theories of suppression or deception. Conspiracism fills a gap left by disillusionment, justifying the delay of expected revelations by invoking hidden enemies and institutional silencing. Religious studies scholars must also consider the history of conspiracies 'about' religions. Targeting religious groups by conspiracist rhetoric that taps into long-standing fears and prejudices. These narratives often repackage old scapegoating tropes under the guise of rational scepticism. At the same time, conspiracy theories also arise within religious communities. Internal narratives of persecution function as a response to external resistance, bolstering group identity and deepening the sense of a battle between good and evil. The label 'conspiracy theory' itself functions as a rhetorical tool of exclusion. It discredits certain claims not necessarily on their content but by their association with irrationality. Conspiracy narratives challenge dominant regimes of truth by proposing alternative explanations rooted in 'stigmatised knowledge'—a term used by Michael Barkun to describe beliefs outside accepted epistemological norms. Conspiracism, like religion, provides existential meaning, moral orientation, and interpretive coherence in chaotic times. To dismiss it wholesale as irrational is to overlook its social function and symbolic resonance. For scholars of religion, taking conspiracy theories seriously means understanding them as part of a broader cultural system that negotiates uncertainty, distrust, and moral order. Engaging with conspiracy theories on these terms—critically, but not dismissively—opens a path to better understand contemporary belief systems, their anxieties, and their hidden hands.

[42] Robertson, D.G. (2017). The hidden hand: Why religious studies need to take conspiracy theories seriously. Religion Compass, 11(3-4), p.e12233. doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12233.

Conspiracy against science

In an age dominated by misinformation and emotional reasoning, pseudoscience has become a widespread cultural force—challenging the authority of scientific knowledge and eroding public trust in expertise. 'Pseudoscience: The Conspiracy Against Science[43]', edited by Allison B. Kaufman and James C. Kaufman, offers a comprehensive and urgent examination of this phenomenon, drawing on psychology, history, sociology, and science communication to understand and combat the growing influence of pseudoscientific thought. The modern world is not only awash with information but overwhelmed by misinformation. This 'post-truth' condition reflects a societal preference for intuition, anecdote, and emotion over analysis, data, and rigor. From climate change denial and anti-vaccination movements to beliefs in haunted houses and telekinesis, the persistence of pseudoscientific ideas is not just a fringe curiosity—it is a pressing issue with profound consequences for public health, education, and democratic governance. The pseudoscience does not simply stem from ignorance. It flourishes because it provides cognitive and emotional rewards. Pseudoscientific beliefs offer simplicity in the face of complexity, certainty in the face of ambiguity, and empowerment in the face of helplessness. Cognitive biases—confirmation bias, pattern recognition, and the affect heuristic—are deeply embedded in human cognition, shaping how people interpret evidence and assess truth. Even highly educated individuals, the book shows, are not immune when outside their domain of expertise. One of the most striking themes is how pseudoscience mimics the surface features of science—technical language, appeals to evidence, claims of expertise—while rejecting its foundations: scepticism, falsifiability, and openness to revision. Karl Popper's classic demarcation criterion, falsifiability, remains a crucial tool, though the editors emphasise that the science-pseudoscience divide is more of a spectrum than a binary distinction. What separates science from pseudoscience is not the absence of error, but the presence of mechanisms to detect and correct it. Pseudoscience and conspiracy thinking form a dual front in the ongoing challenge to rational, evidence-based reasoning in modern society. Both question the legitimacy of established institutions and undermine public understanding of science, though their methods and motivations differ. Pseudoscience often imitates the structures and language of science to gain legitimacy, while conspiracy theories tend to reject mainstream authority outright. Together, however, they foster a culture of scepticism that distorts truth and promotes doubt in scientific expertise. Like conspiracy theories, pseudoscientific claims have deep historical roots and have grown more influential in the postwar period, particularly during times of institutional mistrust. The characteristic trait of conspiratorial logic is that an evidence against a claim is interpreted as evidence for it. This inversion of critical thinking mirrors pseudoscience's frequent dismissal of contradictory data, especially when that data originates from authoritative or academic sources. Such reasoning not only resists falsification but thrives on its own isolation, turning critique into fuel for further belief. Yet an essential difference between the two lies in their orientation toward scientific authority. While conspiracy theorists often seek to dismantle scientific credibility, pseudoscientists attempt to co-opt it. Intelligent design theory, for example, does not merely deny evolution—it mimics scientific methodology to gain a foothold in academic discourse. Pseudoscience arises not from opposition to science but from its cultural prestige; pseudoscientists want the legitimacy of science without submitting to its standards. One of the key arguments in 'Pseudoscience: The Conspiracy Against Science' is that efforts to eliminate pseudoscience entirely may be unrealistic. Attempts

[43] Kaufman, A.B. and Kaufman, J.C. (2019). Pseudoscience: the conspiracy against science. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mit Press.

to define science rigidly or to refute pseudoscientific claims one by one are limited in their effectiveness. Scientific knowledge is provisional, evolving as new evidence becomes available. Yet the public often demands certainty and definitive answers. When science provides nuanced or cautious conclusions, it can appear weak or indecisive—fertile ground for pseudoscientific narratives that promise clarity and confidence. This problem is compounded by the conflation of legitimate concerns with unfounded speculation. For instance, critiques of pharmaceutical malfeasance are often drowned out by baseless anti-vaccine rhetoric. Such confusion damages both public health and the credibility of scientific critique. Meanwhile, powerful institutions weaponise the label 'conspiracy theory' to discredit critics and deflect scrutiny.

Empires of conspiracy

In 'Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America[44]' Timothy Melley claims that in postwar American culture, conspiracy has emerged not merely as a narrative device but as a defining structure of feeling. The paranoia and erosion of personal autonomy reflect a cultural crisis rooted in transformations of subjectivity, agency, and power. As society became increasingly dominated by massive bureaucracies, corporate conglomerates, and military-industrial structures, individuals perceived themselves as increasingly controlled by impersonal systems. This perceived loss of control produced what Melley terms 'agency panic'—a widespread anxiety over the inability to locate or exert personal agency in a world governed by vast, often invisible powers. Contrary to narratives that portray postmodernism as a liberation from modern alienation, Melley suggests that postmodern literature and theory remain deeply entangled in paranoid concerns. Rather than replacing the paranoid subject with a fragmented, schizophrenic one, postmodernism amplifies the fear of dispersed agency by imagining new, systemic threats. Novels by Pynchon, DeLillo, and Burroughs do not abandon the concept of a coherent self but rather reassert it through their paranoid plots. They project individual anxieties onto external systems—corporations, governments, technologies—that appear to act with intentionality and coherence, turning abstract structures into subjects with agency. The persistence of conspiracy as a cultural logic reflects more than narrative fashion; it speaks to how people in complex societies attempt to manage uncertainty. When cause and effect are opaque, when actions are shaped by opaque institutions or global networks, individuals resort to the explanatory comfort of conspiracy. Paranoia functions as a strategy to reassert agency, even in distorted form. It transforms randomness into design, contingency into plot, and systemic complexity into the intention of a hidden actor. Melley contends that postwar American paranoia is not a psychological aberration but a symptom of broader social transformations. As traditional structures of meaning and individual authority erode, people search for substitutes—often through conspiratorial thinking. Postmodernism, rather than deconstructing agency, often reproduces its crisis. Thus, the 'empire of conspiracy' is not just a reflection of cultural irrationality, but a coping mechanism for navigating power in a depersonalised world. To understand postwar and contemporary culture, scholars must take conspiracy seriously—not as delusion, but as a logic through which agency is imagined, contested, and narratively reasserted in the face of systemic complexity.

[44] Melley, T. (2000). Empire of conspiracy : the culture of paranoia in postwar America. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Contemporary conspiracy culture

In 'Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability[45]' Jaron Harambam adopts a neutral position on the truth claims of conspiracy theories and explores the everyday experiences of individuals engaged in the conspiracy world. In an age of widespread scepticism toward institutional authority and the proliferation of competing truths, conspiracy theories have become a central cultural phenomenon. Rather than treating them as pathological deviations from rational discourse, Jaron Harambam proposes understanding them as meaningful worldviews that reflect broader tensions around knowledge, legitimacy, and power. This approach shifts the sociological gaze from debunking to understanding, from policing truth to analysing how it is constructed and contested. The aim is not to assess whether conspiracy theories are true or false but to investigate how they make sense to the people who believe them and what they reveal about the societies in which they circulate. This stance stems from a commitment to methodological agnosticism—a refusal to judge truth claims in advance. Like an anthropologist studying unfamiliar belief systems, Harambam examines conspiracy theories as cultural forms that offer coherence, explanation, and resistance. In a fragmented information landscape, where trust in science, media, and government has eroded, these theories articulate dissent and make visible the cracks in dominant epistemologies. To call them irrational is to miss their significance; they are not simply false beliefs, but expressions of a deeper anxiety about who controls knowledge and how truth is produced. In democratic societies, dissent must not be pathologised or excluded. Conspiracy theories, however flawed, often express legitimate grievances and distrust born from historical experiences of marginalisation or deception. Silencing them only deepens alienation. As Zygmunt Bauman suggests, the intellectual's role is not to arbitrate truth but to interpret and mediate between competing values. Similarly, Bruno Latour calls for the sociologist to act as a diplomat, fostering dialogue between divergent ontologies. In this spirit, Harambam calls for democratic engagement rather than epistemic policing. Creating inclusive spaces for open debate is not only a matter of intellectual fairness but a requirement for social cohesion. Conspiracy theories should not be dismissed outright, but neither should they be accepted uncritically. Their power lies in challenging dominant narratives, questioning the monopoly of official truth, and pushing society to reflect on the foundations of its knowledge systems. Ultimately, the value of Harambam's approach is that it reframes the study of conspiracy culture as a mirror for our broader epistemic crisis. The rise of conspiracy theories signals a breakdown in trust, a struggle over who gets to define reality, and a call for more participatory models of knowledge. Rather than asking whether conspiracy theorists are right or wrong, the more urgent question is: what does their rise say about the current state of truth, authority, and democracy? Sociology, then, must not retreat into neutrality as detachment but embrace neutrality as engagement—an openness to understanding the complexity of belief in unstable times. Harambam's work shows that conspiracy theories are not fringe aberrations, but vital cultural responses to a world where the very structure of knowing has come undone. In such a world, the task is not to restore old certainties but to create new conditions for shared inquiry, dialogue, and the democratic pursuit of what Karl Popper called the 'best available truth'.

[45] Jaron Harambam (2020). Contemporary Conspiracy Culture. Routledge.

The conspiracy theory of society

In 'The Conspiracy Theory of Society[46]' Karl R. Popper wants to clarify the central task of social science by rejecting a flawed view he calls the 'conspiracy theory of society'. This theory assumes that major historical and social events are the result of deliberate planning by powerful groups or individuals—shadowy forces orchestrating wars, economic crises, revolutions, or technological change. While it masquerades as rational analysis, it is, in fact, a secular continuation of ancient myths—like Homer's belief that events on the battlefield mirrored secret intrigues among the gods on Mount Olympus. In modern form, gods are replaced with elites, secret societies, or political institutions presumed to act with malevolent coordination. This mindset is appealing because it gives people a sense of clarity and agency in a confusing world. But it is fundamentally misleading. The world is not ruled by hidden masterminds. More often, events spiral from a multitude of actions that no one fully controls. Even when conspiracies are real, they often unravel or fail, plagued by the very unpredictability they seek to dominate. This is the 'Oedipus Effect': attempts to reshape society based on conspiratorial assumptions often produce the very chaos they claim to prevent. The reality is that most social outcomes are unintended. People act with goals in mind, but the broader effects of their actions usually exceed or contradict those intentions. Understanding these unintended consequences is the true task of social science. Unlike conspiracy theorists, who reduce complexity to conscious planning, social scientists examine the chain reactions of individual behaviour within specific institutional settings. These ripple effects—often unforeseen and sometimes undesirable—shape the world far more than any secret scheme. Moreover, conspiracy theories wrongly treat institutions as if they had unified wills. They assign agency to abstract collectives like governments, corporations, or classes, as if such bodies acted like singular individuals. But institutions are composed of many actors with divergent goals and limited knowledge. Their actions produce collective effects that are rarely the product of deliberate design. Thus, the flaws in the conspiracy theory of society are twofold. First, it ignores the disordered and emergent nature of social processes. Second, it falsely assumes that intentions can fully account for outcomes. The true insight of social science lies not in exposing conspiracies but in tracing how the interaction of many individuals—each acting with partial knowledge and varied motives—gives rise to broader patterns and structures. The study of these unintended consequences allows us to make sense of society without resorting to paranoia. Instead of imagining secret plots, social science seeks to understand how institutions persist, change, or fail—despite the absence of any overarching plan. In doing so, it offers a more realistic, and ultimately more useful, account of how history unfolds. By showing how both conspiracies and conspiracy theories mimic the very structure of linguistic agreement, Karl Popper situates the problem not merely in politics or psychology, but in the heart of communication itself. It is a warning, and a philosophical challenge, that remains startlingly prescient.

Cognitive infiltration

In their 2008 paper[47] 'Conspiracy Theories', legal scholars Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule examine the rise, persistence, and consequences of conspiracy theories in modern

[46] Popper, K.R. (2019). The Conspiracy Theory of Society *. Routledge eBooks, pp.13–15. doi:https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315259574-2.

[47] Sunstein, C.R. and Vermeule, A. (2008). Conspiracy Theories. [online] papers.ssrn.com. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1084585.

society. They argue that such theories—those attributing remarkable events to secretive, malevolent actors—are not just fringe curiosities, but potential threats to democratic institutions and national security. Particularly in the realm of counterterrorism, both domestic and international conspiracy theories can undermine public trust, derail policies, and incite violence. The authors highlight the real-world prevalence of such beliefs, including widespread suspicions of U.S. government involvement in the 9/11 attacks, which by the mid-2000s were embraced by large segments of both American and international populations. At the root of conspiracy theories lies a psychological and epistemological condition Sunstein and Vermeule call 'crippled epistemology'. People exposed only to limited or skewed information sources—often shared within ideological or social echo chambers—develop distorted worldviews. These views are sustained by social mechanisms like informational cascades and group polarisation, where individuals increasingly adopt beliefs held by their peers, assuming credibility and expertise where there may be none. The result is a self-reinforcing system: misinformation gains traction not through evidence, but through emotional resonance, repetition, and conformity. Moreover, conspiracy theories provide a sense of order and agency in the face of uncertainty and trauma, making them both emotionally compelling and difficult to dislodge. A key challenge in confronting conspiracy theories is their self-sealing nature. When a theory becomes entrenched, counterevidence is not just rejected—it is reinterpreted as part of the cover-up. Government denials are seen as proof of guilt, expert refutations are dismissed as disinformation, and attempts to debunk the theory can backfire, deepening believers' commitment. This dynamic makes direct rebuttal a delicate task and, in some cases, ineffective or counterproductive. To address these challenges, Sunstein and Vermeule show more interest in a strategy they term 'cognitive infiltration'. Cognitive infiltration involves inserting agents—either government operatives or sympathetic outsiders—into groups that promote conspiracy theories. The goal is to subtly introduce dissenting views, challenge faulty logic, and raise doubts without triggering defensive reactions. By disrupting groupthink and encouraging epistemological diversity, such agents can, in theory, erode the certainty and appeal of conspiratorial narratives. The goal is to introduce 'cognitive diversity', enabling the group to encounter competing viewpoints and reassess its foundational beliefs. This can be achieved through engagement in forums, online discussions, or even offline meetings where false claims are questioned, internal contradictions are exposed, and factual counterpoints are introduced. These infiltrations can be open (where the agents reveal their affiliations) or covert (where their identities remain hidden). Each method comes with risks: transparency may reduce influence, while secrecy invites backlash if discovered. Crucially, Sunstein and Vermeule acknowledge that credibility is key to success. If counterarguments are perceived as government-sponsored, they may be dismissed out of hand. Therefore, they suggest leveraging independent experts—scientists, academics, journalists—who can deliver credible counter speech without being visibly linked to state agendas. However, they also recognise the irony that too much government involvement risks exposure, which could invalidate the effort entirely: 'The price of credibility is that government cannot be seen to control the independent experts'. This proposal has drawn heavy criticism. Legal scholars and civil liberties advocates have raised alarms over potential violations of free speech, governmental overreach, and the erosion of public trust. Critics argue that the use of covert tactics, especially against domestic audiences, blurs the line between security policy and propaganda. While the idea of cognitive infiltration remains controversial, it highlights the need for innovative responses to an age-old problem:

the human tendency to seek hidden causes and assign blame in the absence of clarity. In conclusion, conspiracy theories present complex dangers that cannot be addressed through force or silence alone.

2.3. Kayfabe and roleplaying

'Sincerity becomes performance when it is constantly watched'.

— Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

'In a world that is constantly posing, the act of being genuine becomes revolutionary'.

— Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (paraphrased synthesis)

Kayfabe

(Kayfabrication: When spectacle becomes truth)

Kayfabe has evolved far beyond the squared circle of professional wrestling into a pervasive logic of modern life, where truth and fiction entwine in an elaborate performance. From economics and politics to social media and science, we now navigate systems built on consented illusions rather than transparent facts. What once was a mechanism to manage danger and boredom in choreographed brawls now structures public discourse, commodity markets, and personal identities. By reframing deception as a collaborative, narrative-driven process—what Eric Weinstein christened 'kayfabrication'—we uncover a new grammar of social reality: one that privileges emotional engagement and spectacle over empirical certainty. Recognising kayfabe's reach helps explain why audiences willingly suspend disbelief and why correcting falsehoods often fails to disrupt the broader performance.

Kayfabrication

In 2011 Eric Weinstein authored an article[48] that 'kayfabe' is the most important scientific concept to improve your cognitive toolkit. The term is born in the scripted world of professional wrestling, offers a compelling framework for understanding the contemporary breakdown between truth and performance in broader cultural, political, and scientific systems. In the words of Weinstein: 'We may fairly ask what rigorous system would be capable of tying together an altered reality of layered falsehoods in which absolutely nothing can be assumed to be as it appears. Such a system, in continuous development for more than a century, is known to exist and now supports an intricate multi-billion-dollar business empire of pure hokum. It is known to wrestling's insiders as 'Kayfabe''. Rather than dismissing deception as an aberration or pathology, kayfabe recasts it as a functional necessity—an evolved technique for managing unpredictability and boredom within complex systems. It signals a shift from systems based on truth and transparency to ones based on mutually sustained illusions, where audiences knowingly participate in the fabrication. In its original context, kayfabe referred to the illusion

[48] www.edge.org. (n.d.). Edge.org. [online] Available at: https://www.edge.org/response-detail/11783.

that wrestling matches were real athletic contests. Wrestlers adopted personas, engaged in staged rivalries, and followed scripted storylines, all while maintaining the performance as if it were authentic. The audience, fully aware of the fiction, agreed to suspend disbelief—not because they were misled, but because the performance was compelling. The real betrayal was not lying but breaking the script. This careful equilibrium between reality and illusion helped transform wrestling from a failed competitive sport into a multibillion-dollar entertainment industry. This same dynamic now appears far beyond the wrestling ring. In economics, opposing theoretical schools present public feuds while relying on similarly flawed assumptions that failed to anticipate real-world collapses like the 2008 crisis. In politics, performative rivalries between parties or candidates often mask shared systemic interests. In journalism, adversarial narratives increasingly resemble staged drama. And in theoretical science, particularly physics, debates between camps like string theory and loop quantum gravity produce more rhetorical heat than empirical progress. These institutions maintain kayfabe not by denying reality, but by managing it theatrically, crafting narratives that preserve engagement and coherence even when substance is lacking. The shift to kayfabrication—the systematic replacement of reality with coordinated illusion—emerges in part to control two central problems: danger and dullness. Real competition, real inquiry, and real conflict are risky and often boring. Kayfabe resolves this by imposing structure on uncertainty and turning unpredictability into performance. Whether in war, love, finance, or politics, spectacle displaces substance. Online dating becomes an exchange of curated identities; geopolitical posturing replaces direct combat; asset bubbles inflate around hype rather than value. These examples show kayfabe functioning as a stabiliser—a way of preserving audience engagement without confronting the full volatility of unmediated reality. Yet kayfabe has limits. Sometimes the fiction spills into real life: staged rivalries provoke genuine animosities, fictional relationships lead to actual infidelities, and audience complicity turns into disillusionment. Still, audiences often tolerate or even embrace these breaches. When wrestling publicly admitted it was scripted, fans did not turn away. They accepted the contract anew, recognising that they were not being deceived but invited to imagine. The illusion held, not because it was undetected, but because it was desired. This dynamic now defines large parts of public life. Truth is not so much obscured as outsourced to the audience. The burden of belief is no longer on the performer's credibility but on the viewer's willingness to play along. This transformation marks a deeper shift in epistemology and social structure: the performative overtakes the evidential, and narrative coherence matters more than factual consistency. Kayfabe thus provides a new grammar for deception—one did not root in error or bad faith but in consent, expectation, and mutual performance. It reveals a society less interested in discovering the truth than in co-creating believable realities. In this sense, kayfabe is not only a cultural metaphor but a diagnostic tool. It helps decode how modern institutions retain legitimacy not by being true, but by being entertaining, persuasive, and narratively compelling. In this landscape, lies are not aberrations to be unmasked but structural necessities to be interpreted. Ultimately, kayfabe is not about fooling the public but about maintaining a performance that everyone agrees not to interrupt. As audiences learn to see through the act while continuing to participate in it, deception ceases to be a hidden manipulation and becomes a shared enterprise. The curtain is always slightly open, but no one dares to pull it back entirely. Kayfabe survives not because people are gullible, but because they are complicit—and because, often, they prefer the show.

Political entertainment

In 'Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America' (2023), Abraham Josephine Riesman explores how the theatrical concept of kayfabe—originally from

professional wrestling—has become a defining feature of American political discourse. The book uses the career and cultural influence of Vince McMahon, the longtime head of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), as a springboard to examine how American politics now mirrors wrestling's scripted spectacle. Riesman argues that politicians have adopted not just wrestling's language and performance techniques, but its entire logic of engagement, built on emotional manipulation, spectacle, and the blurred line between truth and fiction. Central to Riesman's analysis is the idea that Donald Trump embodies the wrestling 'heel'—a deliberate antagonist who thrives on outrage and division. Like a wrestling villain, Trump crafts an image that polarises the audience, drawing loyalty from fans and hatred from opponents. This tension ensures constant engagement. Riesman terms this dynamic 'neokayfabe', a postmodern evolution of the traditional kayfabe in which the audience no longer needs to believe the performance is real. In 'neokayfabe', everyone knows it is a show, but they play along anyway—truth becomes less relevant than spectacle, and sincerity is replaced by strategic irony and provocation. In this performative world, political success depends less on policy coherence and more on emotional impact. Politicians use kayfabe-style tactics to provoke reactions, dominate media attention, and sidestep accountability. Their roles as 'heels' generate continuous discourse regardless of content. It is like an open season to be bad character to attract more online traffic. Audiences are conditioned not to seek truth, but to pick sides in a drama. Even criticism or fact-checking amplifies their performance. Riesman shows how outrage is a resource, not a liability, and those who master the dynamics of kayfabe can harness antagonism to consolidate power. The social network principle 'angry people click more' is activated. The book also traces how the aesthetics and psychology of wrestling—especially from the 1980s and 1990s WWE era—shaped a generation of Americans. Millennials grew up watching over-the-top personas engage in scripted battles where winning was often secondary to showmanship. This cultural formation blurred the line between fiction and public life, making kayfabe not just entertainment but an unconscious political grammar. Politicians now succeed by being larger-than-life characters, not thoughtful leaders. The shift in American public life occurs when emotional gratification and narrative spectacle have eclipsed reasoned debate. Entertainment has overtaken truth as the currency of political power. The kayfabrication of America, lies in the country's growing willingness to accept the blurring of real and fake, fact and fiction. Politics becomes a stage, the electorate a crowd primed for conflict, and public discourse a series of orchestrated storylines.

Language of kayfabe

The language of kayfabe, originally developed within the spectacle of professional wrestling, provides a unique framework for understanding how fictionalised narratives function to create shared realities. While kayfabe is often viewed as a cultural curiosity of sports entertainment, its structure and techniques resemble other powerful discursive forms, such as religious and extremist political language. These linguistic systems differ in stakes, intentions, and consequences, but they all operate by constructing enclosed worlds of meaning through stylised performance, emotional resonance, and audience participation. In wrestling, kayfabe refers to the ongoing presentation of scripted feuds, alliances, and characters as real. Wrestlers adopt exaggerated personas—heroes (faces) and villains (heels)—engaging in conflict narratives that evoke classic themes of betrayal, redemption, and victory. The success of kayfabe lies in the audience's consent to suspend disbelief. Fans knowingly participate in the illusion, appreciating the narrative arc even as they remain aware of its fabrication. This conscious complicity fosters community through entertainment, generating affective bonds among spectators without requiring ideological commitment or moral allegiance. Religious

language, by contrast, is aimed at communicating sacred truths, often through metaphor, ritual, and allegory. While it also draws on narrative and symbolism, it seeks to engage believers on a deeper existential level, promising moral order, transcendence, and purpose. Unlike kayfabe, the stakes are ultimate—concerning salvation, sin, and spiritual destiny. Here, the language must be perceived as sincere, even if metaphorical, and its authority is grounded not in performance but in tradition, revelation, or divine command. Extremist language similarly constructs closed systems of meaning but with the intent to polarise, mobilise, and dominate. It operates through binary oppositions—us versus them, good versus evil—and relies heavily on propaganda, repetition, and emotional escalation. Unlike kayfabe, which returns the audience to reality unchanged, extremist language demands loyalty and real-world action. It distorts facts to fit ideological narratives and reinforces group identity by excluding and vilifying others. The language becomes a tool of control, producing cognitive rigidity and moral certainty. All three forms of language are performative but differ in how they negotiate truth and reality. Kayfabe is overtly fictional but emotionally authentic, inviting playful belief. Religious language is spiritually authentic, rooted in faith and doctrine, often resistant to empirical scrutiny but deeply meaningful to its adherents. Extremist language weaponises belief, treating facts as malleable in service of its goals, and demands unwavering acceptance under threat of social or physical consequences. The language of kayfabe offers an inclusive, low-risk mode of shared fiction, where audiences join a temporary world without abandoning their autonomy. Religious language, though more exclusive, seeks lasting moral transformation and collective identity. Extremist language narrows reality into rigid ideological scripts, producing conformity through fear and exclusion. Despite their differences, all three reveal how language does not merely reflect reality—it constructs it, sustains it, and sometimes destroys it. In analysing kayfabe alongside religious and extremist discourse, it becomes clear that language is not a passive medium. It is a stage on which meaning is enacted, truth is negotiated, and entire worlds are made believable, whether for joy, salvation, or domination.

Neokayfabe in politics

In neokayfabe, the audience knows the performance is fake but chooses to go along with it. Truth becomes secondary to drama, but entertainment becomes close to genuine experience. Neokayfabe language mix exaggerated claims with half-truths and self-aware irony, inviting both support and ridicule. Yet, both reactions serve his purpose: attention. Like a wrestling heel, speaker feeds off antagonism as much as admiration, knowing that 'it pays to be hated'. The public personas of the politicians are crafted not to unite, but to divide strategically, weaponising outrage into influence. The ancient divide-and-rule principle works on every level. This framework also explains the dynamics of intra-party conflict. A rivalry between two 'faces' forced into conflict becomes a theatrical battle between dominant egos, a performance with political stakes but constructed like a wrestling feud. A generation raised on the spectacle-heavy, melodramatic world of 1980s and 1990s wrestling absorbed its lessons: villains can be more compelling than heroes; winning is less important than holding the spotlight; and narratives do not need to be true—they just need to resonate. These sensibilities now shape American politics, where emotional impact trumps policy, and every public appearance is a performance calibrated for reaction. The most dangerous feature of neokayfabe is its immunity to correction. Fact-checking fails not because it is wrong, but because it is beside the point. Neokayfabe does not depend on truth; it feeds on confusion. Audience accepts inconsistency as part of the act, rendering traditional political norms obsolete. Understanding American politics today requires fluency in the language of kayfabe—where perception is power, and the audience, knowingly or not, plays its role in the performance. Unlike classical kayfabe, which

required belief in illusion, neokayfabe accepts that the illusion is false but sustains it anyway. This conscious suspension of disbelief, now dominates not only political communication but also and public discourse. The audience is not deceived so much as entertained, involved, and emotionally invested. The goal is no longer credibility but impact and immersion. In this climate, fact and fiction are deliberately interwoven. Political language becomes a strategic tool not for clarity or persuasion but for narrative construction. Neokayfabe rejects consistency. Speech can contradict itself freely because coherence is no longer expected. What matters is emotional alignment and spectacle. Truth gives way to authenticity—not in the sense of honesty, but in the performance of being 'real'. This emotional logic reshapes language itself. Rational discourse is displaced by slogans, tropes, and phrases that carry affective weight. In this framework, saying what is socially forbidden or controversial becomes a badge of courage. Speaking the 'unsayable' does not need to be factually correct; it merely needs to stir the right feelings in the right crowd. The audience, in turn, amplifies this speech—through memes, chants, hashtags—making them active participants in the performance. Media, too, plays a vital role. By amplifying outrageous statements, even when criticising them, media institutions unwittingly participate in the spectacle. Traditional tools like fact-checking become irrelevant. Audiences do not necessarily believe falsehoods; they support the speaker despite—or because of—them. The emotional drama is the message. The consequences are significant. Neokayfabe erodes trust in shared reality, encouraging parallel truths and deepening societal fragmentation. It normalises chaos as a governing tool, disorients opposition, and renders strategic outrage a permanent feature of political engagement. Critics become villains, and every attack reinforces the leader's status as persecuted truth-teller. This logic cements division. As fact and fiction dissolve into managed personas and narrative warfare, Riesman's insight provides a framework for understanding a world where language no longer seeks agreement, only allegiance. Neokayfabe is not deception; it is a pact—an aesthetic of power built on performance and belief. At the heart of neokayfabe is performative authenticity—the paradox of being seen as more 'real' precisely because the performance is so overt.

Roleplaying

(Curated selves: The performance of modern identity)

Roleplaying of identity has become a defining feature of contemporary existence, turning the self into both actor and stage. Whether on social media, in the workplace, or within social movements, individuals craft and perform personas that blend fragments of truth with intentional fabrication. This neokayfabe dynamic offers adaptability—allowing us to project confidence, solidarity, or rebellion—but at the cost of emotional labour, anxiety, and eroding trust. As audiences grow ever more attuned to the artifice, genuine expression risks being discounted as another façade. Yet we continue to participate, craving connection even when we suspect it is staged. Recognising identity roleplaying as a structural, mutual performance helps explain why authenticity feels both essential and elusive in a world where everyone is playing a part.

Roleplaying of an identity

In contemporary society, identity is no longer a fixed or purely internal concept—it is something performed, curated, and projected. Roleplaying of an identity refers to the conscious or unconscious adoption of a self-image that aligns with external expectations, social pressures, or aspirational ideals. This behaviour is not limited to actors or politicians but is embedded in daily life: a professional who suppresses doubt to appear confident, a parent who masks

exhaustion to embody perfect care, or a social media user presenting a filtered life story. These performances are neither lies nor wholly authentic—they are strategic constructions designed for audiences. This phenomenon exemplifies what Abraham Josephine Riesman calls neokayfabe: a postmodern form of performance where both the actor and audience are aware of the fabrication, but engage with it as if it were real. Individuals know they are playing roles, but this self-awareness does not diminish the effect. On the contrary, the performative illusion becomes more powerful, because it is willingly believed in, even if only temporarily. Central to this is performative authenticity, the act of staging moments to appear spontaneous and genuine. A candid photo that took ten tries, a vulnerable confession designed to increase relatability, or the careful crafting of a persona aligned with activist or professional goals—all are examples of authenticity being performed. These staged performances depend on emotional resonance rather than factual truth. The illusion of honesty becomes a tool for building connection, status, or influence. Neokayfabe thrives in digital culture, especially on platforms like Instagram or TikTok, where the pressure to 'be real' paradoxically encourages greater levels of editing, scripting, and branding. Identity becomes content. Personal lives are reshaped into narratives optimised for emotional impact and social validation. Even rebellion and nonconformity can become roles played to fit into niche subcultures or ideological groups. Beyond digital media, the culture of personal branding reinforces this dynamic. People build coherent images of themselves—as mentors, survivors, creators, or leaders—by highlighting fragments of truth while omitting inconvenient contradictions. Strategic storytelling replaces full disclosure. These constructed identities are maintained not only for acceptance but often as necessary performances in navigating institutions, careers, and social life. The implications are profound. On one hand, identity roleplaying offers flexibility and resilience—it allows people to test roles, survive social pressures, or adapt to institutions that demand conformity. On the other hand, it imposes emotional labour. Constantly performing a curated self can cause dissonance, exhaustion, or anxiety. When everyone is assumed to be performing, genuine expression risks being dismissed as another layer of branding or manipulation. Moreover, trust is destabilised. As audiences become aware of the artificial nature of modern identity, scepticism deepens. Interpersonal relationships may suffer, and societal dialogue becomes mired in doubt over sincerity. Yet even within this cynicism, people continue to play roles and emotionally engage with others' performances. This paradox is the essence of neokayfabe. In conclusion, roleplaying of identity is no longer peripheral but central to contemporary life. It reflects a broader cultural transition where perception, narrative, and emotional effect take precedence over truth, and where authenticity is no longer a given—but a performance that must be carefully maintained.

Virtue signalling without virtue

In an era dominated by social media and the politics of appearance, virtue signalling has emerged as a defining behaviour of public discourse. At its core, virtue signalling refers to the public expression of moral values—usually progressive or popular ones—not out of genuine commitment, but to demonstrate moral superiority or alignment with a socially approved ideology. While the term carries a distinctly negative connotation, often used to criticise superficial or insincere activism, it captures a deeper crisis in how public morality is performed, consumed, and manipulated. What was once a private struggle for moral excellence has become a performance stage, where signs of virtue are displayed like badges rather than embodied through difficult action or sacrifice. Virtue signalling is not inherently about lying. In fact, most who engage in it likely believe at some level in the causes they proclaim. The problem lies in the disconnection between speech and action, in the performative nature of the act, and in the

motivation behind it. Social media accelerates this performativity by rewarding fast, emotional expressions over slow, reasoned deeds. In a digital world driven by likes, shares, and follower counts, moral expression becomes a currency. Posting a badge, retweeting buzzwords or wearing a slogan t-shirt becomes a ritualistic display—one that signals group membership, awareness, and compassion, even when unaccompanied by any practical effort toward the cause. This phenomenon is particularly visible in corporations and celebrities, who adopt moral postures to enhance brand loyalty or public image. A fashion company may launch a sustainability line while maintaining exploitative labour practices; a public figure might advocate for inclusivity while operating within exclusive, elite networks. The contradiction is not hidden—it is often part of the spectacle. If the right words are said and the right symbols are used, the performance is accepted, even praised. This is not activism, but theatre. Historically, virtue was understood as a habitual practice—a commitment to moral behaviour even when it is difficult, inconvenient, or unseen. The ancient philosophers, from Aristotle to the Stoics, insisted that virtue could not be separated from action. Words alone were never enough. Even religious traditions warn against public displays of righteousness. The Gospel of Matthew admonishes those who 'practice their piety before others to be seen by them', insisting that real virtue is measured in hidden sacrifice, not public praise. In this light, the modern spectacle of virtue signalling appears hollow, a parody of moral life rather than its fulfilment. But some argue that public displays of moral concern can still have value. Even symbolic gestures can create awareness, normalise compassion, and help shape cultural expectations. Moreover, accusing others of virtue signalling can become its own kind of signalling—what has been termed 'vice signalling', in which people publicly reject moral language to appear cynical, tough, or nonconformist. A politician who mocks climate activists may not be indifferent to the environment but seeks to appear grounded and pragmatic. This counter-performance, too, relies on the audience’s perception. Nonetheless, the proliferation of virtue signalling raises serious concerns. First, it fosters a culture of moral inflation, in which louder expressions are mistaken for deeper convictions. Second, it encourages tribalism, dividing people into symbolic camps where slogans matter more than substance. Third, it distracts from real problems. When moral discourse becomes a spectacle, attention is diverted from complex, structural challenges that require long-term commitment and nuanced thinking. Genuine activism, with all its uncertainties and imperfections, is replaced by simplified narratives and emotional immediacy. The rise of virtue signalling also erodes trust. If people begin to doubt the sincerity of moral language, they become more sceptical of others’ commitments and more hesitant to express their own. In such a climate, authentic moral engagement becomes difficult. People fear being called hypocrites or attention-seekers, so they stay silent or retreat into cynicism. Thus, the performative nature of modern virtue discourse not only undermines the credibility of public morality but makes meaningful dialogue harder to sustain. Ultimately, virtue signalling reflects the tension between identity and integrity. In a world increasingly shaped by platforms, personas, and performance, the temptation to craft a moral identity for external approval is powerful. But identity without integrity is fragile. It collapses under scrutiny. The antidote is not silence, nor the rejection of public discourse, but a renewed understanding of virtue as something more than a pose. Real virtue is difficult. It involves listening more than speaking, acting without being seen, and risking unpopularity when justice demands it. To restore substance to public morality, the gap between values and actions must be closed. A single tweet is not activism. Wearing a cause is not living it. And projecting virtue without effort or consequence is not moral progress—it is camouflage. What is needed is less moral grandstanding and more quiet courage. In a culture obsessed with optics, the most radical gesture may be sincerity.

Vice signalling

In a culture driven by spectacle and polarisation, language has shifted from a tool of communication to a performance of identity. Public discourse is now shaped by the staging of values rather than their substance. One increasingly prominent mode of speech is vice signalling—the deliberate display of transgressive views to provoke, attract attention, and affirm group belonging. It is not simply the absence of virtue, but the calculated inversion of it. The speaker courts controversy not to inform, but to inflame, using outrage as a signal of authenticity. Vice signalling works by reversing the logic of virtue signalling. Where virtue signalling seeks moral approval by aligning with socially accepted causes, vice signalling seeks admiration through defiance. It thrives on dramatic language, exaggerated claims, and inflammatory statements. These utterances need not be coherent or factually accurate; their function is to evoke an emotional response, to cast the speaker as fearless and unfiltered. In this way, transgression becomes a rhetorical resource. Saying what is forbidden, offensive, or taboo is treated as a sign of courage rather than ignorance. This mode of communication reduces language to symbolic gestures. Public figures increasingly adopt controversial stances not to articulate beliefs, but to perform strength or authenticity. Political discourse, media appearances, and online commentary become arenas for affective signalling. The speaker is rewarded not for thoughtful argument, but for provoking strong reactions. Whether praised or condemned, visibility is the goal. Audiences shaped by this environment learn to respond to speech emotionally rather than analytically. Words are judged not by their truth value but by their alignment with group feeling. Loyalty replaces evaluation. Language becomes a tool for tribal identification, and discourse is replaced by echo chambers. Memes, soundbites, and slogans spread not because they clarify, but because they resonate. The meaning lies not in content, but in function—who said it, how it feels, and what it signals. Vice signalling also influences political strategy. Leaders adopt polarising rhetoric to project toughness or realism, not necessarily to propose workable policies. Their statements are often theatrical, designed to provoke rather than persuade. This performance of toughness reassures supporters, even as it alienates others. The message is less about governance and more about identity: who is strong, who is real, who is not afraid to offend. As a result, public debate is increasingly shaped by posture rather than substance. Both virtue and vice signalling contribute to a broader shift in public language, where speech becomes a performance of character rather than a medium for reasoned exchange. Virtue signalling may simplify justice into fashionable stances; vice signalling may reduce realism to blunt cruelty. In both cases, complex realities are flattened into emotional expressions designed to affirm belonging or difference. This dynamic rewards extremity, discourages nuance, and turns speech into a contest of impressions. What emerges is a culture in which expressing values—whether virtuous or rebellious—is less about conviction and more about visibility. The performance of moral concern without action is hollow, but so is the celebration of defiance without thought. Vice signalling, like its counterpart, reflects a media environment where provocation, not persuasion, rules. It replaces clarity with spectacle and substitutes the pursuit of truth with the pursuit of attention.

Vocal fry as an epidemic

Vocal fry—the low, creaky vibration at the bottom of the vocal register—has become one of the most divisive linguistic trends of the last decade, particularly when used by young women. Popularised by celebrities and reinforced by countless social media influencers, this speaking style is often dismissed as annoying, lazy, or fake. But behind the irritation it provokes in some listeners lies a deeper set of questions about gender, power, and linguistic change. At its core, vocal fry is a physiological technique: the vocal cords relax and vibrate slowly,

producing a gravelly tone. Yet in Western societies, when young women use vocal fry, it is often pathologised or ridiculed as a cultural disease. Critics argue that vocal fry makes speakers sound untrustworthy, unintelligent, or uninterested—especially in professional settings. Yet studies show that people with deeper voices, particularly men, are more likely to be promoted and earn higher salaries. Women adopting vocal fry may therefore be responding strategically to the gendered expectations of authority, deliberately lowering their vocal tone to command more respect or mirror male speech patterns in the workplace. But not all use of vocal fry is strategic. For many young women, it is simply part of their speech community, a way to perform identity and fit into their social milieu. Language is not static; it is performative and adaptive. Trends like vocal fry reflect shifting dynamics in gender expression and generational belonging. Just as giggling in the 1950s or shrieking in the 1960s once annoyed older generations, vocal fry has become a scapegoat for broader anxieties about youth, femininity, and cultural change. Much of the backlash comes from the assumption that vocal fry is fake or lazy—a deliberate affectation by teenagers or 'idle rich' celebrities. In the research 'Habitual Use of Vocal Fry in Young Adult Female Speakers[49]' the authors examined the presence of vocal fry in a population of female college students who speak Standard American English (SAE). Their analysis revealed that a considerable proportion of these speakers habitually use vocal fry during sentence reading, especially at the ends of sentences. Crucially, the study distinguished between continual and selective use of vocal fry—suggesting it may serve a linguistic function, such as signalling syntactic or pragmatic boundaries. That said, the social dimension cannot be ignored. Some students may be emulating speech patterns heard from media figures or peers, making fry part of a wider social identity marker. Comedic scenes like those from the show 'Loudermilk' (Season 2, Episode 1) portray fry-heavy voices as annoying signals of boredom or arrogance. With deadpan irritation, Sam interrupts the barista to ask why she is 'talking like that'. She, unfazed, insists 'this is my voice', but Sam calls out the affectation. What follows is a comedic confrontation in which Sam mimics her vocal fry, accusing her of choosing to sound disinterested and insincere—something, he claims, is popular among 'annoying teenagers and rich people'. These portrayals often serve as moral judgments about femininity, class, or youth. The use of vocal fry says less about the voice itself and more about cultural expectations. Vocal fry, like uptalk, has become a proxy for debates over gender, status, and authority. Vocal fry challenges traditional hierarchies. Young women speaking in a way that suggests control or knowledge can upset those who think authority should sound different—more 'proper'. Others may hear vocal fry and associate it with cultural change they do not like: social media culture, changing gender roles, or perceived declines in decorum. But those are reactions to social shifts, not to a sound itself.

[49] Wolk, L., Abdelli-Beruh, N.B. and Slavin, D. (2012). Habitual Use of Vocal Fry in Young Adult Female Speakers. Journal of Voice, [online] 26(3), pp.e111–e116. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2011.04.007.

3. HOMO LOQUENS

3.1. Drama of talking

(The speaking animal: Evolution, abstraction, and Homo Loquens)

'Speech turned individuals into collaborative beings by weaving social bonds larger than any tribe'.

— Dan Everett, Language: The Cultural Tool

'With speech, humans stepped into abstraction—into worlds built of stories, myths, and imagined futures'.

— Ernst Pulgram, Homo Loquens: An Ethological View

Dunbar's hypothesis

In the search for the evolutionary roots of language, one of the most compelling theories belongs to anthropologist Robin Dunbar. His 1993 paper, 'Co-Evolution of Neocortex Size, Group Size and Language in Humans[50]', proposes that language developed as a more efficient substitute for grooming—a key behaviour used by primates to maintain social bonds. Among chimpanzees, up to 43% of time is spent grooming, a tactile way to reinforce alliances and group cohesion. But as human group sizes grew beyond what could be maintained through physical contact alone, speech emerged as a kind of vocal grooming. It allowed individuals to maintain social bonds with multiple people at once, while also freeing up time and attention for other survival tasks. Dunbar suggests that the increase in human brain size, especially in the neocortex, made this transition possible. As groups expanded, the cognitive demands of keeping track of relationships required new tools—language was the innovation that met this demand. Unlike grooming, which is one-to-one and time-consuming, language enabled multi-party interaction. It turned social maintenance into something scalable, efficient, and mobile. Talking replaced touching, and humans began to share not only affection, but stories, rules, plans, and myths. Yet language did not emerge solely from the need to bond. Dunbar's model intersects with more cognitive theories, particularly those emphasising recursion. Recursion—the ability to embed structures within structures—allowed humans to nest ideas, build grammar, and expand meaning. Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch argued that recursion marked a leap from finite animal signalling systems to the open-ended infinity of human language. With recursion, humans could organise thoughts in sequences, apply logic, construct poetry, and speculate about the future. This ability depended not just on mental agility, but on the repurposing of existing neural circuits. Early humans co-opted perceptual and motor capacities for linguistic use. These adaptations, honed by selection, became so optimised for language that they lost their original non-linguistic functions. The brain became leaner but more specialised. Interestingly, this coincided with a reduction in overall brain volume during the Holocene. Smaller brains, paradoxically, became more efficient—supporting speech with less energy and

[50] Dunbar, R. I. M. (1993) Co-Evolution of Neocortex Size, Grouping Size and Language in Humans, Behavioural and Brain Sciences.

material. A crucial moment came roughly 30,000 years ago, when language transformed from a practical tool into an abstract, recursive system. With this shift came syntax, adverbs, and the cognitive scaffolding for mathematics, philosophy, and law. Language began shaping the human mind, not just reflecting it. The world became increasingly structured by stories, agreements, rules, and symbolic reference. Dunbar's theory, when placed in dialogue with research on neural specialisation and recursion, suggests that language is not merely a byproduct of intelligence, but a selected trait—one that reshaped social organisation, cognition, and biology. From grooming to grammar, the evolution of Homo loquens reflects a transition from tactile immediacy to abstract coordination, from touch to thought.

Homo Loquens

Humans are often described not just as Homo sapiens—the wise ape—but as Homo loquens, the speaking animal. Language, in this view, is not merely a tool for communication but the defining act of being human. While many animals produce sounds or gestures to signal threats or needs, their communicative systems are limited in scope, incapable of novelty, syntax, or abstraction. In contrast, human speech exhibits nearly limitless flexibility, with no exhaustive inventory of possible utterances. Each spoken sentence may be new, unrepeatable, and laden with nuances shaped by context, intent, and social relation. Ernst Pulgram, in 'Homo Loquens: An Ethological View[51]', argues that while animal signals are emotionally triggered responses tied to environmental stimuli, human speech is symbolic, conceptual, and intentional, arising from a singular neurological capacity that no other species possesses. This capacity, however, is not embedded in a specific organ, like a bird's syrinx or a cat's tail. Speech is a behavioural phenomenon—an emergent use of lungs, diaphragm, vocal cords, tongue, and lips. These were not evolutionarily selected for language but adapted through an intricate interplay of necessity and imagination. Pulgram frames this ability within the broader context of ethology, the study of instinctive behaviour. Just as birds build nests without instruction and spiders weave webs without being taught, so too do human infants, exposed to language, absorb its structure effortlessly. The apparent spontaneity of this process suggests an inherited biological predisposition—an instinctive hunger for speech. Ethological thought contrasts sharply with behaviourist traditions, which see language as a set of conditioned responses to stimuli. Behaviourists, focusing on observable action, dismiss internal mental states as speculative. But the instinct to speak, like the instinct to bond, explore, or grieve, resists reduction to mechanical repetition. The extraordinary speed and fluency with which children acquire language, without formal instruction, supports the view that speech is not wholly learnt but unfolds from within. Nonetheless, the instinct for speech has its window. Children acquire language naturally; adults must work at it. The critical period for effortless language learning appears to close with age, leaving later learners reliant on reason and reflection. The same adaptive brilliance that enables humans to speak also allows them to build languages, change them, manipulate them—but only if their environment awakens the instinct early. As Pulgram notes, the early emergence of speech reflects a design tuned for sociocultural integration. Humans are not simply thinkers who happen to speak, but social animals who learn to think through speech. Language acquisition, then, reveals a dual nature: it is both instinct and artifice. It emerges from a biologically prepared mind but is shaped by culture, community, and time. Understanding humans as Homo loquens requires acknowledging not just that people speak, but that speech

[51] Pulgram, E. (1975) Homo Loquens: An Ethological View. Harvard University Press.

itself speaks them into being. It is not merely a mirror of thought but the furnace where thought is forged.

Speaking Man

The story of Homo sapiens is, in many ways, the story of speech. In 'The Making, the Rise, and the Future of the Speaking Man[52]', by Dan M. Mrejeru, the evolutionary emergence of language is not treated as a late cultural development but as a defining threshold that reorganised the human brain and rewired human life. The 'speaking man' is not simply the one who talks, but the one who became something new through the act of speaking—a different kind of species, shaped as much by words as by tools or bones. The journey toward 'Speaking Man' began long before syntax or grammar. It began with climate. Around seven million years ago, falling CO_2 levels transformed African forests into savannas. This change forced early primates onto open ground, where bipedalism emerged as a solution for mobility and visibility. Walking upright freed the hands—not just for carrying tools but for gesturing, perhaps even mimicking sound. In this new posture, the lungs, diaphragm, and vocal apparatus could begin their long reconfiguration. A body prepared itself for a mind it had not yet evolved. With hands available and attention shifting to cooperation, tool use appeared. The 'Oldowan' and 'Acheulean' stone technologies were not just material advancements—they demanded planning, imitation, and transmission. These acts required a scaffolding of shared understanding. Long before abstract language emerged, there were forms of communication rooted in rhythm, mimicry, and motor memory. Tools were not just objects; they were symbols—fossilised actions carrying intention. What followed was not linear. Brain growth accelerated, but the organisation of that brain remained apelike well into the age of Homo erectus. Still, something changed. Around 500,000 years ago, geomagnetic anomalies may have triggered bursts of neurogenesis, possibly by increasing atmospheric carbon-14 and reactive oxidative species. These events, though speculative, align eerily well with bursts of innovation: fire use, collaborative hunting, perhaps even proto-symbolic behaviour. The brain began to reshape itself in ways no skull alone could show. By 200,000 years ago, Homo sapiens had emerged—anatomically modern but not yet fully symbolic. The leap came later. Between 100,000 and 30,000 years ago, brain architecture shifted again. Globularity increased. Frontal-parietal asymmetry—the so-called Yakovlevian torque—intensified. The brain was no longer just larger; it was differently shaped. This new shape allowed for complex memory, narrative thought, and linguistic recursion. Speech did not just evolve—it reorganised the internal space of the mind. The archaeological record confirms this. Burials, ornaments, pigments, and tools show a mind increasingly obsessed with meaning. Symbolic culture bloomed. The speaking man was not simply surviving but imagining—marking territory, mourning the dead, mythologising existence. In Mrejeru's view, the speaking man is not a fixed identity but a phase of transformation. Speech changed the brain, the brain changed the environment, and the environment fed back into the evolution of speech. This feedback loop made us not only social but historical. Speaking became the foundation of civilisation, of memory, of future-making.

We have turned into new species

The transformation from tool-using hominids to language-bearing humans is not merely a cultural leap but a biological shift of profound depth. In 'How We Have Turned Into Another

[52] Mrejeru, D. M. (2020) The Making, the Rise, and the Future of the Speaking Man. București: Integral.

Species: The Story of Homo Loquens[53]'(2020), Dan M. Mrejeru argues that the emergence of language introduced a new cognitive layer—one that rerouted perception, distorted attention, and slowly altered the structure of the human brain. Language, far from being a neutral tool for sharing information, became a secondary task overlaid on perception, subtly undermining direct sensory awareness and reshaping human reality. Some studies in cognitive science show that even passive listening reduces cortical efficiency during visual tasks. The brain, when parsing speech, pulls attention away from other stimuli. Language interferes with the world rather than simply describing it. This interference is not a defect, but an adaptation. As language imposed new demands on attention, humans compensated by withdrawing from wild environments, building shelters, tools, and stable communities. Language helped people endure abstraction by minimising external threat. Visual studies on saccades and gaze tracking reveal how perception is built not as an objective stream but as a filtered continuity, structured by delay and inference. Language, layered over this delay, magnifies the distortion, allowing humans to construct a linear, symbol-driven world. This latency—around 190 milliseconds—shapes perception itself. What is not seen clearly is named. What is named becomes seen. Through speech, humans began to reprogram their senses toward meaning rather than presence. Mrejeru explores the striking correlation between the growth of linguistic complexity and the physical reduction in brain size. Craniometric data show a sharp drop in cranial capacity during the Holocene, roughly the last 10,000 years. Male skull volume decreased by about 10%, female by nearly 18%. Yet this decline in size did not reduce symbolic ability. On the contrary, it coincided with more advanced language and more efficient neural systems. As entropy decreased in the brain—less neural 'noise', more precision—language became the dominant system of ordering thought. Smaller brains, shaped by energy-saving adaptations, proved sufficient for the demands of speech-based societies. What emerges is a hypothesis of augmentation by reduction. Language did not increase raw computational power but refined its direction. It introduced new constraints—latency, abstraction, detachment—but also new affordances: memory, planning, and symbolic exchange. This transformation was not merely cultural or intellectual. It altered the species. Homo loquens is not a variant of Homo sapiens but a descendent, carrying in its neural architecture the quiet cost of speech. The evolution of language was not without trade-offs. As humans gained access to shared symbolic worlds, they lost immediacy. Perception became mediated, and the self, increasingly defined through linguistic structure, began to live at one remove from its environment. Yet it is through this remove—through speech—that humans learnt to dwell not only in space, but in time, memory, and meaning.

Man as a talking animal

The phrase Homo sapiens, meaning 'wise man', has long served as humanity's self-assigned title, but perhaps Homo loquens—the talking human—would be more accurate. Dennis Fry, in his book 'Homo Loquens: Man as a Talking Animal[54]', argues that what truly distinguishes humans from other species is not intellect alone, but the capacity for speech. Language is not merely an adornment of thought; it is its very architecture, shaping how people perceive the world, connect with others, and organise their inner lives. Human physiology closely resembles that of many animals, yet humans alone have turned vocalisation into a flexible, generative system. While rats may exhibit neurosis, and chimps can use symbolic gestures, no other species creates complex narratives, philosophies, or jokes. What sets humans

[53] Mrejeru, D. M. (2020) How We Have Turned Into Another Species: The Story of Homo Loquens. București: Integral.
[54] Fry, D. (1977) Homo Loquens: Man as a Talking Animal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

apart is the conceptual leap—the ability to name, define, and manipulate the world symbolically. The word 'tree' does not merely point to a leafy object; it evokes ideas, categories, and even memories. In this way, language builds a bridge between abstract thought and the material world. Crucially, speech is acquired with astonishing ease by young children. From cries to coos, babble to words, most children master the fundamentals of their native language before the age of five. This process unfolds through a combination of imitation, neurological readiness, and social motivation. Early vocalisations like 'mama' or 'dada' are not just sounds; they are attempts to map internal recognition onto shared expression. Recognition always comes before production—children understand long before they speak, and their first utterances reveal a trial-and-error refinement of sound, rhythm, and meaning. The phoneme system—those basic sound units like /m/, /d/, and /n/—develops gradually. As a child's vocabulary grows, so does their ability to distinguish and reproduce finer acoustic contrasts. Similarly, grammar emerges not through rote teaching but through the child's own creative synthesis. When a toddler says 'All-gone milk', they are already building syntax, even without formal instruction. Overgeneralisations like 'bringed' or 'mouses' are not mistakes but signs of an intuitive grasp of linguistic rules. Beyond cognitive structure, language also binds humans into communities. Speech serves not just to inform but to comfort, negotiate, assert, and perform. Greetings, small talk, and polite exchanges may seem superficial, but they serve as vital social rituals, echoing the grooming behaviours seen in primates. In Fry's words, language is the lifeblood of society—without it, the human group as it exists would be unthinkable. Yet, for all its gifts, language is also a source of misunderstanding and manipulation. People rarely reflect on the mechanisms of speech. Just as one breathes without understanding oxygen exchange, so most speak without knowing how sounds are formed or meanings shaped. The power of language can be used to elevate or deceive, to build or divide. The very abstraction that makes speech so powerful also makes it dangerous—ideas can be distorted, repeated, and weaponised. The miracle of speech lies in its ordinariness. Everyone uses it, yet few grasp its full mystery. From the first infant cry to the most sophisticated conversation, language remains the defining feature of Homo loquens—not simply the 'wise man', but the talking one.

Rising of the speaking man

The evolution of the human brain did not unfold in a slow, linear fashion. Instead, it occurred in waves—sudden, accelerated phases of neurodevelopment catalysed by environmental forces and internal adaptations. In 'The Hypothesis of Homo loquens[55]', Dan M. Mrejeru presents a compelling argument that the transition from Homo sapiens to Homo loquens—the speaking human—was driven not only by genetic drift and cultural innovation but also by a series of geomagnetic events that intensified oxidative processes, triggering bursts of neurogenesis and the emergence of new cerebral functions. Roughly 80,000 to 43,000 years ago, geomagnetic disturbances such as the Norwegian-Greenland Sea and Laschamp excursions led to significant increases in atmospheric carbon-14. This radiative change did not harm the species—it enhanced it. Contrary to the common association of radiation with damage, low-dose ionising radiation stimulated the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS), which in moderate amounts functioned as essential signalling agents. These ROS helped generate new neurons in brain regions tied to memory, pattern recognition, and abstraction, particularly in the hippocampus and the developing frontoparietal network. This biological surge laid the foundation for what Mrejeru calls a 'language-ready' brain. As new neural connections formed

[55] Mrejeru, D. M. (2020) The Hypothesis of Homo loquens: A Radically Revised Perspective. Bucharest: Independent Multidisciplinary Research.

and circuits complexified, cognition moved beyond instinct and survival. The brain began constructing internal models, abstracting from perception, and projecting imagined outcomes. These were the seeds of language—not just sound production, but structured, recursive, and symbolic communication. The globularisation of the skull, particularly evident in the precuneus and thalamus, corresponds to this reorganisation. These regions became hubs for consciousness, self-awareness, and verbal composition. Between 43,000 and 30,000 years ago, language entered a second phase. The rise of verbs and adverbs allowed humans to describe not only objects but actions, sequences, and causality. This reshaped the mental landscape. Thought became motion; stories could unfold across time. The frontoparietal synthesis—the ability to combine elements into coherent new expressions—emerged, making possible not just communication, but imagination, planning, and moral reasoning. Language was no longer merely a function of the brain; it was shaping the brain. These neurological developments were accompanied by perceptual shifts. As language became dominant, visual processing slowed. Humans gained the ability to fixate longer on specific details, increasing saccadic latency to enhance cognitive resolution. This enabled deeper analysis but also reduced contextual awareness. People became more capable of abstraction, but more vulnerable to fragmentation. Language carved the world into categories, but sometimes at the cost of unity. Cognition evolved in waves, each initiated by internal and environmental disruptions. The first wave introduced static language—nouns and adjectives—allowing humans to name and describe. The second added verbs and syntax, turning language dynamic and predictive. The third, beginning in the Neolithic and accelerating through the technological revolutions, expanded symbolic systems, culminating in exponential growth in knowledge—and, paradoxically, in a crisis of meaning. As humans built ever more complex societies, the foundational role of language became both a strength and a vulnerability. The same systems that enabled cooperation and culture also made people reliant on abstraction, prone to detachment from their surroundings, and susceptible to losing touch with the contextual, sensory richness of earlier cognition. In this sense, the rise of the speaking man was also the rise of internal complexity—a movement toward the artificial, the planned, and the imagined. The transformation into Homo loquens was not inevitable. It was the outcome of evolutionary chance and environmental influence, of biological plasticity meeting cosmic rhythms. But once this convergence occurred, it opened a path unlike any other in evolutionary history: the capacity not only to describe the world but to remake it through language.

Short history of speaking

Languages are not just tools for communication—they are mirrors of history, shaped by the rise and fall of empires, the carving of river valleys, and the forging of nations. In 'Speak: A Short History of Languages[56]', Tore Janson traces how languages emerged, spread, splintered, and solidified over millennia. He begins not with spoken language's mysterious birth, but with writing—when language began to leave its lasting mark. Writing developed in places where agriculture flourished, and people settled—particularly in fertile river valleys like those of the Euphrates, Tigris, and Nile. In these cradles of civilisation, people built irrigation systems and grew crops in cooperative societies. But managing water, labour, and surplus food required coordination, which in turn demanded a new kind of memory: written records. The Sumerians of Mesopotamia invented cuneiform—wedge-shaped marks impressed into clay tablets—over 5,000 years ago. This writing system, although born in one culture, was so functional that it survived for over three millennia and was adopted by many different languages. Even after

[56] Janson, T. (2002) Speak: A Short History of Languages, Oxford University Press.

spoken Sumerian had vanished, scribes continued to learn and use it, preserving not only language but cultural continuity across centuries. In Egypt, writing emerged soon after, in the form of hieroglyphs. Far from simple pictures, these symbols combined sounds, meanings, and aesthetic flourishes. They were laborious to learn and read, restricting literacy to a tiny elite of scribes. Yet they gave the Egyptian state the power to organise immense public projects, such as the construction of pyramids and the collection of taxes, across vast distances and over centuries. Janson shows that writing often outlived the languages it recorded. Spoken Egyptian evolved over time, while the written form remained conservative. This created a widening gap between how people spoke and how they wrote—a tension still visible today in many modern languages. Later, the focus shifts from empires to nations. As medieval Europe began to consolidate politically, language became a tool of statecraft. Monarchs and reformers promoted vernacular languages—like English, French, or German—as symbols of sovereignty and cultural pride. In the 15th century, when England's Henry V chose to write official letters in English rather than French, he was not only making a personal choice but laying groundwork for national identity. Education and literature played crucial roles. As printing spread, so did standardised grammars, dictionaries, and textbooks, creating what we now call 'national languages'. Writers like Dante, Chaucer, and Cervantes helped mold these tongues into vehicles of high culture. The Church, once the guardian of Latin, gradually ceded ground to local languages in both liturgy and learning. Janson's narrative reminds us that language is not fixed—it responds to power, culture, and necessity. Whether forged under colonial rule, shaped by resistance, or crafted to unify a people, every language tells a story far beyond words.

Written speech

Language begins with sound. For most of human history, people spoke but did not write. Speech came naturally; it was learnt in childhood, passed from mouth to ear without rules carved in stone. Writing, by contrast, had to be invented—and for many cultures, it never was. In 'Speak: A Short History of Languages', Tore Janson explores how speech becomes script and how writing, in turn, reshapes the way people speak and think. In southern Africa, the Sotho languages tell this story with unusual clarity. Before colonial interference, there were many local groups—Kwena, Ngwato, Pedi—each with its own identity, but all speaking variations of a mutually intelligible Bantu language. There was no fixed label like 'Sotho;' people spoke the language of their state, which bore the name of its ruling clan. These distinctions were fluid and functional, suited to a world where writing had no role in preserving language or asserting identity. The arrival of European missionaries in the 19th century changed everything. Suddenly, oral languages had to be written down. And to be written, they needed names. The missionaries—Scottish, French, and German—each created their own orthographies and translated religious texts into the spoken varieties they encountered. These efforts eventually crystallised into Setswana, Sesotho, and Sepedi: three written languages drawn from a continuous linguistic field. Writing fixed them, giving them form and boundaries that had not existed before. But the power of writing extends beyond preservation. Once a language is written, it gains legitimacy. It becomes teachable, examinable, and administrable. When colonial governments established schools, they adopted the missionary-written versions of the Sotho languages. These written forms began to influence the way people spoke—especially in formal or public settings—nudging local dialects toward a national 'standard'. This process accelerated after independence. Botswana and Lesotho adopted Setswana and Sesotho, respectively, as national languages—essential tools of state-building and identity formation. Children learnt to read and write in these tongues, and the gap between spoken and written forms narrowed. What had once been flexible oral systems were now codified languages,

complete with grammars and dictionaries. Janson argues that writing does not just record language; it changes it. It slows down the natural evolution of speech, introduces conscious reflection on usage, and fosters the idea of a 'correct' form. Spoken language continues to shift with time and context, but written language tends to resist change, creating tension between everyday usage and official norms. Thus, the story of Sotho languages illustrates a broader truth: writing may come late, but once it arrives, it reshapes everything. It names, defines, standardises—and in doing so, it constructs the very idea of a language.

Drama of talking

Language learners often focus on words and grammar, yet most of human communication happens without them. Non-verbal cues—gestures, facial expressions, tone, and posture—shape the way messages are sent and received. These elements are not just supplementary; they are fundamental to authentic interaction. Carola Surkamp, in her article 'Non-Verbal Communication: Why We Need It in Foreign Language Teaching and How We Can Foster It with Drama Activities[57]', argues that teaching foreign languages without integrating non-verbal communication is like training a singer to read music but not to perform. Spoken language is always accompanied by physical expression. People do not just speak—they raise their eyebrows, lean in, hesitate, wave. According to some estimates, non-verbal behaviour can account for more than half of communicative meaning. Yet language classrooms often prioritise spoken vocabulary and grammatical precision over embodied expression. The result is students who can form sentences but struggle to navigate real conversations, where intonation, pauses, and gestures often carry more meaning than the words themselves. Surkamp emphasises that non-verbal communication plays multiple roles. It conveys emotions, regulates turn-taking, signals relationships, and illustrates meaning. Some gestures are culturally specific, like a nod for 'yes' or a hand wave for 'hello', while others are more intuitive but equally powerful. A shrug can indicate uncertainty, a stiff posture discomfort. When learners misunderstand these cues—or fail to notice them at all—miscommunication is likely. One way to address this gap is through drama-based pedagogy. Drama exercises invite students to experiment with body language in a structured way. Activities like mirroring, walking with intention, and acting out emotions develop awareness of how posture, facial expression, and movement communicate meaning. Students become more conscious of their own gestures and more attuned to others, building confidence and fluency even before they master the language itself. Drama also encourages emotional engagement. Students are less inhibited when they play roles, and more willing to express themselves physically. These embodied experiences help reinforce memory, improve pronunciation, and foster intercultural sensitivity. In literature, too, non-verbal aspects of dialogue—how characters stand, glance, or speak—reveal subtext and deepen interpretation. Drama brings such texts to life, transforming reading into performance. The intercultural dimension is especially crucial. Different cultures use non-verbal cues in very different ways. Direct eye contact may signal honesty in one place and disrespect in another. A gesture of approval in one context might offend elsewhere. Helping learners navigate these differences can prevent misunderstandings and build empathy. Surkamp proposes that learners explore these variations not as right or wrong but as signs of cultural diversity. Ultimately, integrating non-verbal communication into language teaching makes the learning process more human. It

[57] Surkamp, C. (2014) 'Non-Verbal Communication: Why We Need It in Foreign Language Teaching and How We Can Foster It with Drama Activities', in Scenario: A Journal of Performative Teaching, Learning, Research.

connects students not just to words, but to moods, intentions, and relationships. If communication is a dance between people, then body language is its rhythm.

3.2. Speaking into the air

(Lost in transmission: Speech, solitude, and the collapse of response)

'True speech accepts risk—misunderstanding, non-response, and the dignity of the other…To speak genuinely is to offer oneself into the unknown, relinquishing domination in favour of presence'.

— John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air

Speaking into the air

In 'Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication[58]', John Durham Peters offers a striking reinterpretation of communication, dismantling the modern assumption that it is—or should be—a transparent bridge between minds. Peters instead exposes the deep-rooted tensions, misunderstandings, and metaphysical yearnings that have long haunted our efforts to truly connect. The dream of perfect mutual understanding, so often held up as the goal of communication, is revealed as a fantasy, if not a dangerous one. Communication, he argues, is not the resolution of distance between souls but the drama of its persistence. Peters traces how this longing for communion has shaped theological, philosophical, and technological discourses. From Plato and Augustine to Heidegger and McLuhan, he shows that communication has always been more than the simple transmission of messages—it has been a spiritual ambition, a secularised version of the Christian ideal of communion. Speaking becomes not merely a technical act but a symbolic gesture toward the impossible: the complete sharing of one's inner self. This aspiration, Peters argues, is bound to fail—not because of human error, but because of what communication is. People are not transparent to one another, nor to themselves. Language always intervenes, distorts, and refracts. He contrasts two models: communication as dialogue and communication as dissemination. The first is built on ideals of reciprocity, presence, and mutual understanding; the second on transmission, publicity, and the acceptance of asymmetry. Socrates and Buber exemplify the former, while Jesus, Kafka, and the radio operator stand for the latter. Peters leans toward dissemination—not because it guarantees understanding, but because it acknowledges the ethical dignity of the other as truly other. Rather than merging minds, true communication honours difference and allows space for silence, misinterpretation, and non-response. This reframing has profound implications. It challenges the popular faith that better technologies, clearer messages, or more empathy will solve the 'problem' of communication. Instead, Peters asks people to reflect on the communicative act itself as one of risk, exposure, and uncertainty. Speaking is never just transmitting information; it is venturing oneself into the unknown, knowing one might not be heard, let alone understood. The air into which one speaks is not a neutral medium but a metaphor for the irreducible space between people. This tension is especially visible in mass communication. Broadcasting, in Peters' view, is a form of address that does not presume a response. It resembles prayer more than dialogue. In fact, he argues that mass media inherit theological structures: the notion of an all-hearing, all-seeing audience echoes the omniscient

[58] Peters, J.D. (1999). Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication. University of Chicago Press.

God of Christian thought. Communication becomes an act of faith. The speaker believes in an addressee, though their presence remains unverifiable. The microphone or the page, like the pulpit, becomes a space of vulnerability.

Vulnerability of communication

The vulnerability is not a flaw but a defining feature of communication. The possibility of being misunderstood, ignored, or rejected is what makes any act of expression meaningful. For John Durham Peters, the ethics of communication lie in its acceptance of risk. Attempts to eliminate this risk—through surveillance, technical perfection, or ideological conformity—turn communication into control. The desire to always be understood becomes a will to dominate. Genuine communication, by contrast, involves letting go. It is an offering, not a conquest. The ethics of communication is also an ethics of distance and even deception. This also redefines the speaker's role. Rather than being a transmitter of truth, the speaker becomes a witness, a testifier, a figure who speaks not to inform but to disclose. Such a conception foregrounds speech as an existential act: it is not the content of what one says that matters most, but the courage to speak at all. Language becomes not a container of thoughts but a gesture of vulnerability. In this sense, every utterance is both a reaching out and a letting go. Peters' analysis resonates with the increasing complexity and impersonality of digital communication. In a world of constant connection, misunderstanding has not disappeared—it has multiplied. Online speech often floats unanchored, divorced from context and body, consumed by unknown audiences. The fantasy of perfect transparency—so central to the digital promise—masks the deeper condition of isolation and fragmentation. Peter's work offers a sobering reminder: more communication does not mean more communion. His history, then, is not merely academic—it is philosophical, even theological. By tracing the failures, paradoxes, and metaphysical aspirations of communication, Peters invites a humbler, more ethical approach. He replaces the demand to be understood with a commitment to speak truthfully, to listen openly, and to accept the limits of language. In doing so, he offers not a cure for the failures of communication, but a way to live with them. Communication, for Peters, is not the solving of a puzzle but the staging of a drama. Its failures are not bugs in the system but essential conditions. True communication does not erase distance but honours it. It accepts that the other remains unknowable, that words always fall short, and that speaking is an act of faith. In a world obsessed with control, clarity, and connectivity, 'Speaking into the Air' reminds people that meaning does not arise from erasure of difference, but from the courage to speak despite it.

Homo informaticus

John Holgate’s article 'Homo Loquens Meets Homo Informaticus: Exploring the Relationship between Language and Information[59]' points that in the digital age, human language no longer stands alone. It now coexists with a parallel system of meaning: information. Once defined narrowly through symbols or signals, information has become something much more pervasive, shaping cognition, communication, and culture itself. In this transformation, the classical figure of homo loquens, the speaking human, finds its reflection in 'homo informaticus', the human immersed in data and informational flow. John Holgate explores this shift through the lens of the Philosophy of Information, proposing that information behaves

[59] Holgate, J.D. (2017). Homo Loquens Meets Homo Informaticus: Exploring the Relationship between Language and Information. Proceedings, 1(3), p.91. doi:https://doi.org/10.3390/is4si-2017-04067.

much like a language of its own. It has rules, syntax, and even moods, just as natural language does. This perspective bridges long-standing debates between linguistics and information theory, suggesting that the 'information turn' of the late 20th century grew directly out of the earlier 'linguistic turn' in philosophy. Where philosophers once treated meaning as a property of sentences or speech acts, information theory expanded that logic, redefining meaning as probability, entropy, or surprise. Still, the analogy between language and information is not always simple. Holgate cites Rafael Capurro's trilemma, which warns that treating information as either univocal, analogical, or equivocal across disciplines each comes with conceptual risks. Is an email really the same kind of information as DNA replication? Or is 'information' simply a placeholder for too many different ideas? Natural language, unlike code or data streams, is not reducible to units like bits or 'infons'. It is breath, gesture, mood, time, reference. A shrug, a pause, or a whispered word can carry more significance than a thousand data points. Philosophers like Wittgenstein and Grice already showed how meaning is embedded in human practices, not abstract tokens. Information, when stripped of context, becomes brittle. Language, by contrast, thrives in ambiguity and interpretation. And yet the boundaries blur. As information becomes the currency of power, language becomes increasingly entangled with metrics, algorithms, and quantifiable outputs. Grammar itself begins to resemble governance. Sentence structures impose hierarchy. Data analytics predict speech patterns. Our modes of expression are constrained by search engines and automated suggestions. Even silence becomes a kind of data point. The rise of 'homo informaticus' brings new paradoxes. Language, once a shared tool for reflection and communion, is now a performance monitored by unseen systems. Every utterance—written or spoken—feeds back into the network, analysed and reprocessed. Holgate warns that this feedback loop risks transforming speech into simulation, intention into optimisation. But language is not so easily captured. It retains what Holgate calls 'quiescent centres'—the hidden, still places where new meanings can emerge. These are the lacunae of speech, the ellipses and unfinished sentences, the slips, and hesitations that no AI can fully decode. Here, human meaning resists flattening. Ultimately, the dialogue between homo loquens and homo informaticus is not a battle but a tension. Information brings efficiency, scalability, precision. Language brings resonance, irony, empathy. The future of human understanding lies not in choosing one over the other but in recognising how each reflects the other's limits. Language teaches that not everything meaningful can be quantified. Information reminds that not everything expressible is meaningful. The challenge is not to fuse them into a single system, but to preserve the space between them—where meaning unfolds.

Imaginary thinking

The capacity for imagination—the ability to construct internal worlds detached from immediate perception—stands at the heart of what makes humans unique. In 'How We Have Turned Into Another Species: The Story of Homo Loquens[60]', Dan M. Mrejeru traces the emergence of imaginary thinking back to its early form: magical thinking, a cognitive mode where cause and effect need no rational link. This way of thinking, far from irrational in its original context, allowed early humans to act on hope, fear, and intuition long before formal knowledge systems developed. As language began to evolve, it gave shape to this emerging inner world. Before fully articulated speech, humans likely relied on gesture and basic vocalisation, but as syntax and vocabulary developed, they enabled a finer structure for internal reflection and communication. Language did not simply record reality—it created new versions

[60] Mrejeru, D. M. (2020) How We Have Turned Into Another Species: The Story of Homo Loquens. București: Integral.

of it. Through the recursive power of language, humans could embed ideas within ideas, constructing conceptual layers far removed from the present moment. This allowed for memory, planning, metaphor, and, eventually, myth. Imaginary thinking is not passive fantasy. It is a tool for adaptation. Early symbolic artefacts—burial rites, cave paintings, carved figurines—demonstrate that imagination shaped survival. These objects record how humans began to use fragmented memories and perceptions to build internal models of the world. By analysing and recombining past experiences, people could simulate the future, experiment with decisions, and refine emotional and social responses before acting. Imagination was not escape—it was preparation. Modern neuroscience suggests a biological basis for this shift. Neurogenesis, particularly in the hippocampus, supports novelty detection and adaptive thinking. Mrejeru links spikes in neuroplasticity to environmental disruptions, such as geomagnetic events that may have increased atmospheric carbon-14 levels and stimulated brain development. This aligns with archaeological evidence of sudden cognitive leaps during periods of planetary instability. Evolution, then, may have favoured not just bigger brains but more flexible, imaginative ones. Daydreaming, often dismissed as distraction, is in fact a critical feature of human cognition. As psychologist Eric Klinger noted, it allows the mind to test possibilities in a safe mental space. This aligns with Franklin and Greene's idea of a 'mental syntax'—a cognitive grammar that enables the brain to generate infinite thought combinations from a finite set of concepts. This generative capacity is where imagination meets language most powerfully. Yet this gift has its cost. As people gained the ability to manipulate symbolic detail, they lost some capacity for direct contextual awareness. Imaginary thinking emphasises content over environment; it abstracts and isolates. What was once a world of immediate relations becomes a world of representations. In return, humans gain art, religion, science, and culture—all systems rooted in language, all fuelled by imagination. Mrejeru proposes that civilisation itself is a sustained act of imagination: an augmentation of nature through symbols. To be Homo loquens is not simply to speak, but to speak of what does not yet exist, and then to make it so.

Brain transmutations

Perception is not the direct intake of reality—it is an interpretation, a story the brain tells itself to make sense of the flood of incoming signals. In 'How We Have Turned Into Another Species: The Story of Homo Loquens', Dan M. Mrejeru explores how this interpretive process evolved alongside language, reshaping not only how humans perceive the world but how they process meaning itself. The brain, he argues, does not merely receive data; it structures it, filters it, and ultimately transforms it into knowledge, a process that reflects a profound transmutation of cognitive function. This transformation begins with uncertainty. Perception is guided not by fixed structures but by deviations from randomness—moments that stand out as significant. From chaotic, unstructured stimuli, the brain extracts semi-structured patterns. These patterns are not objective truths but internal geometries of interpretation. Over time, evolution favoured organisms that could reduce this uncertainty, creating order out of noise. Perception became a selective act: highlighting what matters, discarding what does not. The brain's ability to make sense of the world follows a hierarchy: from raw data to information, from information to knowledge, and eventually to what might be called wisdom. This is not just a metaphorical chain. Each stage involves condensation and refinement. Unstructured data has high entropy and low specificity. As it is structured—through language, memory, and logic—it becomes more actionable, though less voluminous. The brain, in this model, acts less like a computer and more like an alchemist, transmuting disordered input into meaning-rich insight. Language plays a pivotal role in this cognitive alchemy. It introduced a new kind of structure—sequential, symbolic, and abstract. Unlike older forms of pattern recognition, which were spatial and

correlative, language forced the mind into linearity. With grammar and syntax, humans began to think in terms of cause and effect, hypothesis, and conclusion. This was not just a change in communication—it was a reorganisation of thought. Mrejeru emphasises that this transition was evolutionary, not merely cultural. Brain structures adapted to support new forms of processing. Selection favoured those who could organise experience through symbolic systems. The result was a shift from nonlinear, affective thinking to logical, plan-oriented cognition. This did not erase older modes of thought but layered them within a new linguistic framework. The transformation also had a social dimension. As language became more structured, so did human communities. Shared narratives enabled coordination, prediction, and innovation. Knowledge became something that could be stored, transmitted, and refined across generations. Civilisations rose not only because people could build tools, but because they could build systems of meaning. What Mrejeru calls the 'transmutation' of brain processing reflects this deep restructuring of perception and thought. The human mind became an engine not just for survival, but for abstraction. It could now imagine futures, construct fictions, and act according to models that existed nowhere but in language.

Complexity and thinking

Language did not simply emerge as a tool for communication—it altered the structure of human thought itself. In 'The Hypothesis of Homo loquens', Dan M. Mrejeru argues that language introduced an entirely new dimension to cognition: the ability to produce and manage complexity through symbolic assembly, which gave rise to a new form of intelligence. This intelligence, rooted in complexification, enabled humans to transcend the immediate present, to imagine, to innovate, and to construct systems far more intricate than any natural environment would demand. Complexification is a process by which discrete elements interact and organise into systems with emergent properties—qualities not inherent in the parts alone. In nature, this happens organically: cells combine into organs, species co-evolve in ecosystems. But with the advent of language, humans began to replicate this process consciously. They built systems of meaning, culture, and technology by combining symbolic units—words, sounds, gestures—into recursive, flexible structures. Language, then, was not just a mirror of thought but its architect. People began to think in ways that mimicked the way they spoke—assembling, disassembling, rearranging. This transformation was not merely cultural but biological. Mrejeru connects the rise of linguistic complexity with episodes of increased atmospheric radiation, such as the Laschamp geomagnetic excursion around 43,000 years ago. During this time, heightened carbon-14 levels may have stimulated oxidative processes in the brain, triggering bursts of neurogenesis. These biological changes increased plasticity in key regions like the hippocampus and precuneus, enabling pattern recognition, memory consolidation, and symbolic recombination—core capacities of complex and imaginative thought. From this neurological substrate, language carved a cognitive space in which thought could detach from perception. Humans began to construct not only sentences, but entire conceptual worlds. Imaginary thinking—the capacity to simulate events, hypothesise alternatives, and invent possibilities—emerged as a natural extension of linguistic recursion. The process of reconfiguring past experiences into novel expressions gave rise to myth, strategy, science, and art. Language facilitated migration, adaptation, and technological innovation. It allowed people to coordinate action at large scales, to embed knowledge into stories and tools. This cultural complexification drove biological evolution forward. As Harpending and Hawks observed, humans evolved faster in the last 10,000 years than at any time before, due in part to the feedback loop between language, culture, and selective pressure. Neuroscience now confirms that language uses distributed networks in the brain. It does not merely occupy the left

hemisphere—it engages systems responsible for motor planning, social awareness, memory, and spatial reasoning. This widespread integration fosters emergent intelligence: a fluid, adaptive mode of thinking capable of navigating unprecedented problems. Language builds intelligence not from innate ability but from relational assembly—from the connection of symbols, patterns, and contexts. Yet complexity is not without its costs. As Joseph Tainter has shown, complex systems often face diminishing returns. The more intricate a society becomes, the more energy is required to maintain it. At a certain point, added complexity no longer solves problems but generates new ones. In cognitive terms, the same holds true: language allows the construction of detailed abstract systems, but as these grow in size and intricacy, the brain must work harder to process and sustain them. Moreover, as complexity accumulates, it becomes vulnerable to collapse. Artificial intelligence, for instance, now develops recursive systems at speeds and depths that humans cannot match. A gap opens between the complexity humans can comprehend and the systems they create. Language, once a tool of control, becomes the scaffolding of structures beyond control. There is also the energy cost of biological complexification. The brain, already the most metabolically expensive organ in the body, had to adapt by reducing neuronal firing rates to support increased internal connectivity. This trade-off slowed learning but allowed for long-term retention and abstract reasoning. External memory systems—writing, digital storage—compensated for the slowdown, but at the price of increasing dependency on external tools. Ultimately, the intelligence generated by complexification is not a stable endpoint but a dynamic process. Every system built through language must balance growth with coherence, imagination with grounding. Imaginary thinking, born of language and neurogenesis, allows humans to imagine futures—but it also tempts them to lose sight of the real. The challenge is not only to build complexity but to sustain it without collapse.

The Left Hemisphere

Roughly 40,000 years ago, the human brain underwent a profound shift. Until then, cognitive activity was dominated by the right hemisphere—the seat of visual, emotional, and holistic thinking. This hemisphere gave early humans their synthetic grasp of reality, allowing for symbolic art, music, and spatial awareness. It was a mode of perception suited to a world understood through correlation and context, not yet constrained by sequential logic. But something changed. Over time, the brain began to favour the left hemisphere—analytical, verbal, linear—and this realignment would set the course for modern civilisation. What triggered the left hemisphere's rise? In 'Why the Modern Brain Favoured the Left Hemisphere' Dan Mrejeru[61] points to geomagnetic events—periodic disturbances in Earth's magnetic field that increased atmospheric carbon-14. These fluctuations, absorbed into DNA, may have boosted neurogenesis, particularly in the dentate gyrus of the hippocampus. The resulting uptick in brain plasticity favoured changes in memory processing, pattern separation, and symbolic abstraction. This neurobiological reshuffling did not erase the right hemisphere's functions but gradually tilted the balance. It set the stage for a new kind of cognition—analytical, dissective, and structurally recursive. Language was the tipping point. Around 30,000 years ago, humans developed increasingly complex verbal systems. The left hemisphere, with its aptitude for parsing sequences and managing syntax, was better suited for this emerging capacity. Unlike images or gestures, language unrolled thought in a line. To speak was to order time and experience. Grammar structured the world into subjects, actions, and objects. Thought, once

[61] Mrejeru, D. M. (2020) Why the Modern Brain Favored the Left Hemisphere, in The Making, the Rise, and the Future of the Speaking Man. București: Integral.

spatial and associative, began to mimic speech itself. Verbal thinking became 'thinking-as-talking'. This cognitive shift allowed for the birth of imaginary thinking. No longer tethered to immediate sensory input, the mind could now assemble internal realities—narratives, hypotheticals, equations. The left hemisphere's facility with detail and geometry made it the architect of abstraction. It allowed humans to imagine that which did not yet exist, to calculate outcomes, to invent tools before building them. From this capacity arose mathematics, planning, and the conception of the individual self. Self-awareness intensified, as people increasingly experienced their own thoughts as discrete from the world. Even at the neurological level, this transition left traces. The left hemisphere exhibited heightened neurogenesis, more intense theta rhythms, and stronger specialisation in language processing. Rhythmic activity shaped by environmental factors—perhaps including geomagnetic variation—deepened this hemispheric asymmetry. The result was not simply a smarter brain, but a differently organised one. But this evolution came with a cost. The rise of the left hemisphere muted some of the holistic, integrative capacities of the right. Emotional nuance, spatial context, and the synthetic logic of dreams were gradually subordinated to analysis, calculation, and precision. The gains in symbolic reasoning were enormous—science, law, architecture—but the world also became less intuitive, less felt. The modern brain, then, is not a neutral result of growth but a directional transformation. It favours language, logic, and linearity—not because these modes are superior in all cases, but because they proved adaptive in an increasingly complex, symbolically mediated world. The speaking human became the planning human. And with each word spoken, the mind became a little more ordered—and a little more abstract.

Power of chanting

In her article 'Science Proves the Power of Chanting[62]', Azriel ReShel presents a compelling case that ancient vocal practices—once seen as spiritual or mystical—are now being validated by neuroscience. Drawing on studies from both Western and Indian research, ReShel shows how rhythmic vocal repetition influences not only the body but also the structure and function of the brain. Chanting has long been part of spiritual traditions in India and Tibet. The Gyuto monks of Tibet, for example, produce deep harmonic chants that resonate in ways many describe as both calming and energising. In India, Sanskrit chanting is a core part of Vedic tradition. Young students, or 'pandits', begin memorising massive bodies of texts from an early age. One of these texts, the 'Shukla Yajurveda', can take over six hours to recite, requiring both cognitive stamina and precise control of tone and rhythm. Dr. James Hartzell, a neuroscientist and Sanskrit scholar, investigated what this intense oral training does to the brain. His findings, later described by ReShel, revealed striking differences between trained Sanskrit chanters and untrained individuals. Brain scans of twenty-one scholars at India's National Brain Research Centre showed that these chanters had up to 10% more grey matter across both hemispheres of the brain. Their right hippocampus, the region responsible for memory and pattern recognition, was notably larger. The right temporal cortex, linked to voice and sound processing, also showed enhanced development. These are not minor changes—they represent structural adaptations rooted in the discipline of vocal recitation. Such neurological benefits align with centuries of traditional belief. Chanting, in many ancient cultures, was considered a way to strengthen the mind, bring clarity, and maintain balance. Now, that belief is backed by physical evidence. Other historical examples reinforce this. In the 1960s, French physician Alfred

[62] ReShel, A. (n.d.). Science Proves the Power of Chanting. Speaking into the Air. Available at: https://manaretreat.com/science-proves-the-power-of-chanting/ \[Accessed 6 Jul. 2025].

Tomatis studied Benedictine monks who engaged in daily Gregorian chants. When their new abbot shortened their chanting hours, the monks became sluggish and exhausted—even though they had more time to rest. Once their chanting practice was restored, their vitality returned. Tomatis concluded that chanting was not merely devotional but physiological: it stimulated energy through sound. In today's world of digital noise and scattered attention, chanting offers a surprising antidote. The practice involves rhythm, breath, repetition, and vibration—elements that engage both body and mind. Even brief chanting sessions can reportedly increase focus, reduce stress, and improve emotional regulation. ReShel's article suggests that these practices could one day be adapted to help mitigate conditions like Alzheimer's or other memory-related disorders. What makes chanting especially powerful is its universality. It crosses religious and cultural lines. The act of rhythmic vocalisation—whether in Sanskrit, Latin, Arabic, or any language—connects humans to breath, sound, and presence. As mindfulness grows in popularity, chanting may offer a complementary tool, especially for those who find silent meditation challenging. Unlike silence, chant gives form to inner stillness. It becomes a way of shaping attention and embodying meaning. The secret of chanting lie in the resonance of repetition. Chanting transforms the voice into a vessel—not only of tradition, but of healing and clarity. Far from being a mystical relic, it is a discipline of sound that aligns body and brain. When words are sung with focus and reverence, they do more than echo. This inner transformation through voice mirrors what happens on stage, where language and presence together dissolve the boundaries of self, turning identity into something fluid and responsive. Yet chanting and singing are rarely solitary acts. They are shaped by the ears that receive them, aimed outward as much as inward—calling for resonance, recognition, or transformation in those who listen. On stage, the self is not a fixed identity but a porous performance, shaped by the presence of an audience. Rather than sealed psychological units, characters are fluid, fragmented, and open to the world beyond the play. When actors speak directly to audience, emotion becomes shared rather than internalised. This disrupts the illusion of coherence, turning theatre into a collaborative act. Shakespeare's stage welcomed this interplay—blurring boundaries between actor and role, fiction, and presence. Here, performance becomes an encounter, not an imitation. Theatrical truth lies not in realism, but in immediacy, vulnerability, and the recognition of unstable words and selves.

Cognitive instrument of voice

In the open-access study 'How Chanting Relates to Cognitive Function, Altered States and Quality of Life[63]', Gemma Perry and her colleagues examine the measurable psychological and neurological effects of chanting across traditions and cultures. Drawing on responses from 456 participants in thirty-two countries, the researchers investigate how various styles of chanting—ranging from repetitive prayer to musical call-and-response—affect mindfulness, mind wandering, flow states, and perceived life quality. What distinguishes this study from prior research is its emphasis on intention. The data suggest that the mere act of chanting is not enough to produce cognitive or emotional benefits. Rather, it is the level of focus, devotion, and clarity of purpose that determines how deeply the experience reshapes attention and mood. Participants who reported strong intentionality while chanting—whether through devotional prayer or meditative attention to sound—were more likely to experience reduced mental distraction and increased present-moment awareness. The study further identifies chanting as a

[63] Perry, G., Polito, V., Sankaran, N. and Thompson, W\.F., 2022. How Chanting Relates to Cognitive Function, Altered States and Quality of Life. Brain Sciences, 12(11), p.1456. https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci12111456

reliable inducer of altered states of consciousness. These include both flow states, where attention becomes effortless and time perception shifts, and mystical experiences, marked by feelings of unity or transcendence. Interestingly, call-and-response chanting—often performed in group settings with rhythm and melody—produced stronger mystical experiences than solitary, silent chanting. This suggests that the social and auditory components of shared vocal practice contribute significantly to its transformative potential. From a cognitive standpoint, the effects of regular chanting are pronounced. Repetitive prayer styles were linked to decreased mind wandering and heightened concentration. This aligns with prior research on the neural effects of mantra repetition and meditation. With repetition comes rhythm, and with rhythm comes a recalibration of thought patterns. Chanting, in this light, becomes not just an expressive act but a neurological practice for directing mental energy. Moreover, the psychological benefits of chanting appear to ripple outward. Enhanced mindfulness and altered states indirectly improve participants' overall sense of well-being. Those who experienced frequent flow or mystical states also reported greater life satisfaction. In other words, the cognitive benefits of chanting do not operate in isolation—they are part of a larger shift in how individuals relate to their minds, their environments, and each other. The study's methodology involved psychometric testing across several variables, including measures of attention, mood, and subjective quality of life. Participants came from diverse traditions: Buddhist, Hindu, yogic, and even secular backgrounds. Regardless of belief system, the act of regular chanting showed similar patterns of cognitive and emotional change, suggesting that the mechanism lies not in the content of the chant but in the structure and intention behind it. These findings hold important implications for both science and society. In an age marked by digital overload and attention fragmentation, chanting offers a simple, accessible method for cultivating mental clarity. Unlike many cognitive therapies or pharmaceutical interventions, chanting requires no external tools—only the voice, the breath, and the will to focus. It is ancient, yes, but increasingly validated by neuroscience as a practice of modern relevance. Chanting, once confined to ritual or spiritual devotion, is now emerging as a cognitive tool. Perry and her co-authors illuminate how the voice—when used rhythmically and intentionally—can recalibrate awareness, reduce distraction, and elevate mood. This research suggests that the power of chanting lies not only in tradition but in biology. When sound is paired with intention, the human mind begins to resonate with its own inner order.

Speech as performance

In 'How to Do Things with Words[64]'(1962), philosopher J. L. Austin challenges the traditional view that the sole purpose of language is to describe the world or state facts. He introduces a different category of speech: the performative utterance, where saying something is not describing but doing something. These utterances do not report on events—they are events. For instance, when a person says 'I do' during a wedding, the words themselves constitute the act of marriage. They are neither true nor false but succeed or fail depending on their context and execution. Austin identifies a pervasive misconception in philosophical traditions: the assumption that all utterances must be assessed by their truth value. While some language clearly functions that way—like 'The sky is blue'—many utterances do not aim to state facts. Instead, they perform actions. These include promising, naming, betting, and apologising, among others. The key idea is that language does not only represent reality; it often

[64] Austin, J.L. (2018). How to Do Things with Words. Eastford: Martino Fine Books.

acts within it. The conditions for a successful performative utterance are precise. First, a conventional procedure must exist. Second, the person must be authorised to perform that act. And third, the act must be carried out properly and completely. If these felicity conditions are not met, the utterance fails—not as a misstatement, but as a misfire. For example, if someone declares, 'I hereby pronounce you husband and wife', but lacks the authority to officiate, the marriage does not happen, no matter how sincerely or fluently the words are spoken. Austin further distinguishes between different kinds of failures or infelicities. A misinvocation occurs when no valid procedure exists, or one is used incorrectly—like christening a ship with no bottle, ceremony, or tradition. A misapplication happens when the situation is inappropriate, such as someone trying to resign from a job they do not have. A misexecution results from errors or incomplete performance. Finally, abuses occur when a performative is executed insincerely, such as making a promise with no intention to fulfill it. Notably, performative utterances do not require an inward feeling to be valid. Saying 'I promise' creates a promise, regardless of the speaker's sincerity. What matters is that the utterance conforms to the recognised procedure and is publicly intelligible. This emphasis on external, social conditions over internal intention is one of Austin's most important contributions. It pushes back against views that language must be a transparent window into the speaker's mind. Moreover, Austin observes that performatives often depend on social rituals and collective recognition. Without a shared context, a performative utterance loses its power. The act is public, relational, and relies on mutual understanding. This moves language away from a merely individual function and grounds it firmly in the communal. The implications of this view are vast. It reframes law, religion, ceremony, and everyday interaction as deeply linguistic practices. Saying 'I apologise', 'I resign', or 'I forgive you' can alter relationships, legal statuses, or emotional landscapes—not because they convey facts, but because they are acts in themselves. Language becomes a tool for doing, not just for saying. This performative theory ultimately reshapes our understanding of communication. It shifts focus from passive observation to active participation. Words are not just passive vessels of thought—they are instruments of social construction. To speak, in many contexts, is to act. And to act through language is to step into a world of rituals, rules, roles, and consequences.

3.3. Modalities of thought

(Framing reality: The grammar of possibility and belief)

'To say 'must' or 'may' is not merely to describe the world—it is to place yourself within it, navigating between certainty and doubt… Every modal utterance is a bridge between worlds: it draws from evidence, norms, ability, and desire to connect fact with value'.

Language of the modes

Polyphonic modality, the theoretical framework used to structure Renaissance music, was not a natural inheritance but an intellectual construction, a learnt system of musical grammar cultivated with precision and care. Frans Wiering's 'The Language of the Modes[65]' traces this development over five centuries, examining how modal concepts shaped compositional practice, music theory, and aesthetic discourse. The book makes clear that the modes were never fixed entities but evolving categories, reflecting changing theoretical priorities and cultural

[65] Wiering, F. (2001) The Language of the Modes: Studies in the History of Polyphonic Modality. New York: Routledge.

values. The earliest attempts to describe polyphonic modality struggled with adapting monophonic chant theory to polyphony's expanded ambitus and contrapuntal complexity. Theories of mode in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, such as those proposed by Amerus, were hesitant and inconsistent. By the late fifteenth century, figures like Johannes Tinctoris had begun to apply more confident definitions, treating the modal framework as a compositional resource. The term mode no longer simply referred to a chant formula; it became a way to classify, explain, and sometimes inspire musical works in which texture, harmony, and cadences played central roles. Throughout the sixteenth century, modal theory flourished, yet it remained controversial. Pietro Aaron, in 1525, acknowledged the challenge of grasping modality, describing it as elusive and difficult to articulate. His observation proved prescient: even as theorists like Glarean expanded the modal system from eight to twelve categories, no single vision prevailed. While some theorists insisted on rigid structures based on finals and ambitus, others embraced more flexible tonal types or hybrid systems such as Banchieri's psalm-tone keys. Despite this diversity, a shared vocabulary began to emerge—finals, species, cadences, and affects—linking theory with the compositional imagination. In performance, modality was both a guideline and a rhetorical device. Cadences, for instance, served as musical punctuation, confirming modal identity or intentionally undermining it. Similarly, melodic subjects often drew on recognisable intervallic patterns or chant-derived motives, reinforcing the sense of modal consistency. These features were not purely mechanical; they also carried expressive weight. As Zarlino and other Renaissance theorists noted, each mode was associated with an affective character—joyful, serious, contemplative—which aligned with humanist ideals about the ethical and emotional power of music. Wiering explores how polyphonic modality was conceptualised differently by influential scholars. Bernhard Meier treated mode as an intrinsic property of Renaissance compositions, analogous to key in later tonal music. For him, theoretical treatises mirrored actual practice, and deviations from modal norms were expressive choices rooted in textual meaning. In contrast, Harold S. Powers saw modes as post-hoc labels—emic categories within a culture-specific discourse. He emphasised tonal types, clef combinations, and system placements as more directly relevant to compositional process than abstract modal categories. This tension between natural property and classificatory label reflects a deeper ambiguity in the modal tradition. Was modality a blueprint followed by composers or a framework retrospectively applied by theorists? Wiering does not offer a definitive answer but instead highlights the importance of historical context. Modal usage varied by region, genre, and even by individual composer. For some, it was a vital expressive resource; for others, a formal shell required by tradition. As the seventeenth century unfolded, modal theory gradually gave way to tonal thinking. The decline of polyphonic modality was not abrupt but marked by a slow fading of theoretical interest, coupled with the rise of functional harmony and key-centred composition. Yet even in decline, modality persisted in certain didactic and sacred repertoires, its language increasingly ossified but still legible. Wiering concludes that modality was a language—one learnt, debated, and ultimately transformed. Like Latin, it demanded education, offered cultural prestige, and served as a medium for intellectual and artistic expression. Its disappearance signals not failure but change: a shift from one musical cosmology to another. The study of modes remains essential not because they forecast tonality, but because they illuminate a world in which music, theory, and meaning were inseparable.

Modes of modality

In contrast to traditional Cartesian views of Universal Grammar, which separate thought from language and treat language as a neutral structure for expressing pre-formed ideas, Un-Cartesian Linguistics emphasises language's generative role in shaping cognition. This

alternative perspective holds that language is not simply a reflection of thought but the very medium through which humans form intersubjective understanding, objectivity, and reflective thought. Language does not merely transmit meaning—it creates the conditions for shared mental life. Among the grammatical structures that make this possible, modality plays a pivotal role, expressing degrees of possibility, necessity, intention, or belief. These are not merely linguistic flourishes but fundamental tools for navigating the uncertain space between the self and the world. The grammatical category of modality, then, stands as a cornerstone in the architecture of human cognitive life. Rooted in traditions stretching back to the Modistae's 'modes of signifying' (modi significandi), modality signals the human effort to reconcile perception with judgment, action with rule, and experience with social order. The Modistae, or speculative grammarians, were a group of 13th- and 14th-century philosophers active in northern Europe. Their theory, rooted in a tripartite structure—modes of being, understanding, and signifying—sought to link grammar with metaphysics. They argued that language reflects reality through deep grammatical structures, opposing nominalist views. Thomas of Erfurt's 'Grammatica Speculativa' became their central text, often misattributed to Duns Scotus. The Modistae anticipated ideas of universal grammar, suggesting all languages share an underlying structure. Their influence reached modern thought, notably inspiring Heidegger, who explored connections between speculative grammar and phenomenology in his early philosophical work. In modality the structure of language meets the texture of reality. Unlike lexical items, which refer to things or actions, modal forms configure the very relation one holds to those things: obligation, likelihood, permission, inference. A sentence with a modal is not only about what is but also about what could be, should be, or might have been. Modality's formal complexity mirrors its cognitive weight. Within minimalist syntax, epistemic modality—expressing knowledge or belief—tends to operate in the higher clausal domains, while root modality—relating to obligation or ability—typically occurs in lower syntactic positions. This spatial distribution reflects the semantic layering of speaker perspective and event structure. These differences are not arbitrary; they suggest a consistent interface between cognition and grammar. Typological variation further illustrates modality's adaptability. Each system reflects different solutions to the same problem: how to communicate intention, judgment, and uncertainty. Modality, viewed through the lens of Un-Cartesian Linguistics, reveals language's unique function in bridging subjective consciousness and collective life. It is the vehicle through which personal beliefs are framed in publicly negotiable terms, enabling coordination, persuasion, and deliberation. The formality of modal expressions—whether in syntactic positioning, cross-linguistic realisation, or diachronic development—points to a universal need: to structure not only what is known, but how it is known and with what degree of commitment. In this sense, modality is not just a grammatical category but a condition of intersubjective life.

Moods and modality

In his book 'Modality[66]', Paul Portner explores the complex role modality plays in human language, situating it at the intersection of grammar, logic, and meaning. Modality, as Portner explains, allows speakers not only to describe the world but to speculate about other possible worlds. It makes language more than a report of facts—it opens realms of possibility, necessity, and obligation. Modal expressions—like must, can, might, and should—are the key tools by which speakers assess, evaluate, and imagine. Whether one says 'You must leave' or 'He might be sleeping', modality shifts the sentence beyond what is into what could, should, or must be. Portner's study focuses on sentential modality—the way entire statements express meanings

[66] Portner, P. (2009). Modality. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

related to possibility, necessity, obligation, or uncertainty. This includes not just modal verbs like must or might, but also adverbs, grammatical constructions like the future tense, and conditional sentences. Modality allows language to refer to situations that are not actual but possible, imagined, or dependent on certain conditions. Portner distinguishes between epistemic modality, which deals with knowledge and belief, and deontic modality, which relates to duties and permissions. He also examines how modality functions below the sentence level, in phrases or words that imply mental states, and at the level of discourse, where modal meanings unfold across multiple sentences. Some modal meanings are covert, expressed without explicit markers but still understood through context. The study connects modality with formal logic, particularly modal logic, which analyses how necessity and possibility function in reasoning. Portner also explores the relationship between modality and evidentiality, which signals the source of a speaker's knowledge, and how both may interact or overlap in some languages. Grammatical mood—such as the subjunctive or imperative—is another way languages express modality, linking syntactic form with semantic function. Ultimately, Portner shows that modality is not a peripheral feature but central to human language. It enables people to express uncertainty, belief, desire, and moral judgment. Through modality, speakers go beyond stating facts—they model alternatives, evaluate norms, and propose possibilities. The connection between mood and modality reveals how syntax and semantics converge to express layers of meaning. The broader implication of Portner's work is that modality is not just one aspect of meaning—it is foundational to how humans use language to model possibilities, norms, beliefs, and desires. Modality governs much of how humans navigate uncertainty and complexity. It is also deeply tied to ethical reasoning, allowing speakers to say not just what is, but what ought to be. The phrase 'You should help' makes no descriptive claim about the world—it proposes a moral evaluation, enabled by the modal structure of language. Portner's 'Modality' offers a comprehensive account of this system, uniting formal semantics with the lived functions of speech. His detailed categorisations—sentential, sub-sentential, and discourse modality—offer a framework for understanding how different layers of language work together to reflect the human capacity for abstract, conditional, and normative thought.

Organisation by category

In their comparative study 'Organisation by Modality, Language, and Category[67]', Jerker Rönnberg, Lars-Göran Nilsson, and Kjell Ohlsson examine how memory recall is influenced by different modes of presenting verbal information. Their focus is the modality effect—the finding that auditory input often leads to better short-term recall than visual input. Through a structured experiment involving sixty participants, the researchers explore how people organise and retrieve information when it is presented across different sensory, linguistic, and semantic dimensions. Their findings suggest that modality—specifically whether a word is heard or seen—exerts a more powerful organising influence on memory than either language or categorical similarity. The experiment involved three types of word lists: some that mixed auditory and visual presentation, some that used two languages (Swedish and English), and others composed of words from unrelated categories. Participants were asked to recall the words in any order they wished, allowing researchers to analyze how the information was organised internally. The results showed that people naturally tended to recall words grouped by the modality in which they were presented, even more than by language or meaning. This suggests that the brain may favour organising verbal data by how it is perceived—through hearing or

[67] Rönnberg, J., Nilsson, L.-G. & Ohlsson, K. (n.d.). Organization by Modality, Language, and Category: A Comparative Study.

seeing—rather than what it means or the language in which it was received. The study's most striking outcome was the strength of organisation by modality. Not only did participants show a clear tendency to group auditory and visual words separately in recall, but they also remembered auditory words more accurately. This confirms the classic modality effect and strengthens the argument that auditory information engages memory systems in a uniquely efficient way. One possible explanation is that auditory input benefits from a kind of echoic memory trace, allowing it to persist longer in the cognitive system than visual information, which may decay more quickly. Importantly, the researchers frame these findings within a functionalistic approach. Rather than viewing memory as a neutral container for information, they emphasise how cognitive structures organise material in ways that serve functions—in this case, preserving and retrieving verbal data efficiently. The preference for modality-based organisation may reflect a natural alignment between sensory input and memory architecture, where the channel through which information enters becomes a key anchor for how it is stored and recalled. These insights have broader implications for educational and communicative settings. If auditory presentation leads not only to better recall but also to stronger internal organisation, then spoken instruction and listening-based learning may offer distinct advantages, especially for tasks requiring memorisation. Similarly, mixed-modality approaches—where learners engage with both spoken and written forms—could enhance overall retention by activating multiple cognitive pathways. The study ultimately revives interest in the concept of organisation in memory research, a topic once central but now often overshadowed by other cognitive models. By showing how sensory modality shapes the structure of recall, Rönnberg and colleagues argue for a renewed focus on how the format of information presentation affects not only what is remembered, but how memory itself is constructed and accessed.

Formal approaches

Modality, the linguistic encoding of possibility, necessity, and other forms of hypothetical reasoning, has long been a central concern in philosophy and linguistics. In 'Formal Approaches to Modality[68]', Kaufmann, Condoravdi, and Harizanov offer a rigorous account of how modal expressions—such as must and should—can be formally analysed using tools developed in modal logic and possible world semantics. The authors begin by distinguishing various types of modality. Alethic modality concerns logical necessity and possibility, while epistemic modality relates to what a speaker knows or believes. Deontic modality involves rules, obligations, and permissions. Doxastic modality deals with beliefs, and temporal modality incorporates time-based considerations. Despite their surface differences, these forms of modality can often be treated using a shared logical structure. The foundation of this structure is modal logic, a formal system in which sentences are interpreted in relation to a set of possible worlds. The core idea is that modal statements refer not only to what is true in the actual world but also to what could be true in alternative scenarios. For example, 'It is possible that John is at the library' means that there exists at least one accessible world in which John is at the library. The expression 'John must be at the library' implies that he is there in all relevant accessible worlds. These accessibility relations are contextually determined and vary by modal base—the set of worlds taken to be relevant given a certain kind of knowledge, rule, or belief. One of the strengths of this formal approach lies in its precision. Modal operators signs such as for 'necessarily' and 'possibly' allow statements to be defined with logical interrelations. For

[68]Kaufmann, S., Condoravdi, C., & Harizanov, V. (2006) Formal Approaches to Modality. In P. Portner & B. H. Partee (eds), Formal Semantics: The Essential Readings. Oxford: Blackwell.

instance, 'necessarily p' is logically equivalent to 'not possibly not-p'. This kind of formalisation enables clarity in comparing modal expressions across languages and contexts, revealing structural similarities and differences. The syntactic side of modal logic builds well-formed expressions through recursive application of modal operators and connectives. But the semantic side—possible worlds semantics—grounds these expressions in models consisting of sets of worlds, interpretation functions, and accessibility relations. These models serve as a powerful tool for analysing entailment, inference, and ambiguity in natural language. In addition to propositional modal logic, the book considers more sophisticated treatments of modality, including how modality interacts with time. Temporal modality reflects how the future is open to multiple possibilities, while the past is typically fixed. This asymmetry requires modal models that incorporate branching time structures and historical alternatives. For instance, a statement like 'She might go to Paris next week' involves quantifying over a future set of possible worlds that are compatible with the present. Further nuance arises from the interaction between modality and linguistic mood, such as the subjunctive or indicative, and evidentiality—how speakers indicate the source of their knowledge. While these topics extend beyond the book's focus, they suggest that modality is part of a larger network of intensional phenomena that encode complex human judgments about possibility, truth, and belief. Applying formal methods to the study of modality illuminates the underlying logic of modal expressions and their interaction with time, knowledge, and obligation. This approach demonstrates that even the most abstract aspects of language can be subject to systematic analysis, offering a model for how logic and linguistics together can clarify the machinery of thought and communication.

Conceptualisation

In 'Epistemic Modality, Language, and Conceptualisation[69]', Jan Nuyts explores the subtle but vital connections between how people speak about uncertainty and how they understand the world. The book goes beyond the formal study of language structures to consider how expressions of probability, possibility, and certainty reflect deeper layers of cognition. This approach, grounded in cognitive-pragmatic theory, treats epistemic modality not as a marginal linguistic feature but as a key window into how language operates in tandem with the mind. Epistemic modality refers to a speaker's assessment of the likelihood of a given situation—statements like 'She must be at work' or 'He's probably asleep' encode degrees of certainty. Traditional linguistic theories have tended to isolate such expressions within fixed grammatical categories, focusing on auxiliary verbs or adverbs as units of analysis. Nuyts challenges this view, arguing that modality is not simply a semantic add-on to syntactic structures but an integral part of the speaker's conceptual framework. Understanding modality, in this light, requires an analysis that bridges form and meaning, language and thought. What distinguishes Nuyts' treatment is his emphasis on how epistemic modality reveals a metarepresentational capacity—the ability to reflect on one's knowledge and beliefs, and to communicate this reflection. This capacity is deeply embedded in human cognition and is central to the functional use of language. Through expressions of epistemic modality, people navigate not just what they know, but how they know it, how confident they are, and what others might reasonably conclude. Such communication is essential for coordination, negotiation, and shared understanding in any social context. The book adopts a function-to-form approach: rather than starting with grammatical categories and seeking meanings for them, it begins with the communicative and cognitive functions that modality serves and looks for how these are

[69] Nuyts, J. (2001) Epistemic Modality, Language, and Conceptualization: A Cognitive-Pragmatic Perspective. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

realised in language. Four main linguistic vehicles are examined—sentence adverbs, adjectives, mental state verbs, and auxiliaries. Each is shown to carry epistemic weight, but in different ways and contexts. Drawing on data from Dutch, German, and English, Nuyts shows how these expressions interact with factors like sentence structure, information flow, and speaker intention. Importantly, the study does not treat epistemic modality as a closed category. Instead, it reveals that speakers continually adapt their linguistic strategies to reflect changing states of mind and levels of certainty. This dynamic, layered use of modality aligns with the concept of 'qualificational layering', wherein speakers modulate the conceptual status of statements according to context, intent, and shared knowledge. In this way, modality is shown to be a tool for shaping intersubjective understanding, not just a device for hedging or softening statements. Nuyts' study reframes modality as a deeply cognitive and interactive phenomenon. By linking linguistic forms to conceptual functions, he highlights how expressions of knowledge and belief are structured, not just grammatically, but psychologically. Modality, in this view, is a bridge between language and thought—an essential mechanism through which people negotiate reality and communicate their understanding of it.

Discourse modality

Language is not merely a tool for transmitting facts; it is a deeply human act of positioning the self in relation to others. In 'Discourse Modality[70]', Senko K. Maynard argues that the Japanese language reveals this expressive function with clarity. She challenges the common conception of language as primarily referential or logical and instead shows how non-referential, emotional, and interpersonal elements play a central role in communication. At the heart of Maynard's study is the claim that language always contains two intertwined layers: propositional content and the speaker's personal voice. Some words and grammatical forms present concrete descriptions of the world, while others reveal how the speaker feels, relates to others, or situates themselves socially. In Japanese, many expressions—modal adverbs, sentence-final particles, clause connectives—serve no clear referential function. Yet they are not meaningless. On the contrary, they communicate subtle nuances of emotion, stance, and interpersonal intent. This subjective voice, often missing in formal linguistic analysis, has long been a concern of Japanese scholarship. Thinkers such as Tokieda and Suzuki identified the split between 'shi' (objective content words) and 'ji' (subjective function words) to explain how the language encodes personal expression. Maynard builds on this tradition and expands it with a framework she calls 'Discourse Modality'—a system for analysing how language reveals the speaker's inner state and relation to others. Maynard identifies four key features of Discourse Modality. First is information qualification, where language marks the speaker's degree of certainty or emotional investment. Second is speech action declaration, where the speaker makes clear their intent—whether they are suggesting, requesting, asserting, or speculating. Third is participatory control, referring to how language coordinates shared attention or invites listener feedback. Finally, there is interactional appeal, where the speaker seeks emotional alignment or solidarity with the hearer. In Japanese, the interactional particle 'ne' offers a striking example. It does not add new information but seeks the listener's confirmation or empathy. Similarly, the modal adverb 'yahari' expresses expectations or emotions about a given situation rather than describing the situation itself. These forms show that language is not just about content; it is about shaping relationships, managing emotions, and expressing who the speaker is. Western linguistics has only recently begun to take such phenomena seriously.

[70] Maynard, S.K. (2005) Discourse Modality: Subjectivity, Emotion and Voice in the Japanese Language. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Structuralist and formalist traditions often treated emotion as peripheral or irrelevant. Yet Maynard insists that grammar and emotion are not separate spheres. Subjective and interpersonal meanings are part of language's structure, not deviations from it. What emerges from this view is a conception of language as fundamentally dialogic. Even monologues imply an imagined listener. Language is always addressed to someone, and its form is shaped by the relationship between speaker and hearer. This echoes Watsuji's philosophy of 'aidagara'—the 'betweenness' that defines human existence and, by extension, human communication. Maynard's goal is not to argue that Japanese is uniquely expressive but to use its features to illuminate a broader truth: that all language contains expressive, emotional, and interpersonal dimensions that standard semantic theories often ignore. By focusing on how language is used in discourse—not just what it says but how it is said—'Discourse Modality' proposes a more complete understanding of meaning. This discourse-based framework refocuses linguistic analysis on the speaker's presence in language. The study shows that subjectivity, emotion, and voice are not stylistic embellishments but foundational to communication. By foregrounding these modal characteristics, it offers a theory of language not as a mirror of the world, but as a medium for expressing the self within social life.

Modalities of thought

Kris Nelson's 'Modalities of Thought – Language and Reality[71]' offers a structured examination of how humans engage with reality through layers of thought. Drawing from classical and modern insights, Nelson situates human understanding within a progression from myth and metaphor to philosophical logic and scientific validation. This development reflects both the historical unfolding of human culture and the cognitive capacities unique to human beings. At the heart of Nelson's framework lies the Trivium: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Grammar collects and organises the raw material of experience—facts, symbols, and observations. Logic then works through these to eliminate contradictions, forming coherent ideas. Finally, rhetoric enables the outward expression of these refined thoughts. This triadic structure mirrors how humans come to know and speak truth: through careful ordering, critical evaluation, and meaningful articulation. Nelson organises human thought into three distinct modalities. The first is the mythological or poetic mode. Rooted in narrative and metaphor, it gives shape to experience through personification and symbolism. This mode can serve both as a tool of insight and as a mechanism of social control. Its truths are often emotionally resonant but logically imprecise. As understanding matures, thought enters the philosophical mode. Here, the mind seeks clarity by isolating concepts from metaphor. Philosophy explores being, knowledge, and ethics through abstraction and internal coherence. This modality replaces analogy with principle, aiming for rigor and generality. It reflects a shift from expression to examination, where the goal is not just to say what feels true but to test whether something is so. The third modality is scientific. It draws upon the philosophical mode but adds the demand of verification. The scientific method tests claims against the natural world, seeking repeatable and falsifiable results. This approach recognises the limits of intuition and insists that knowledge be accountable to evidence. In Nelson's framework, science is not superior to the earlier modes but more constrained—it deals with what can be demonstrated rather than what can be imagined or felt. Nelson expands the discussion by linking thought to consciousness. All organisms respond to stimuli, but only humans are capable of abstraction, symbolisation, and ethical deliberation. Consciousness thus becomes not merely an evolutionary feature but a moral responsibility. To think clearly is not only to know but also to act rightly. This demands

[71] Nelson, K. (2022) Modalities of Thought – Language and Reality. Symbols & Reality.

vigilance, as modern societies increasingly delegate thinking to systems—technological, bureaucratic, or ideological—that encourage conformity and diminish accountability. A key concern is that overspecialisation, media saturation, and cultural programming have fragmented individual responsibility. When thinking is outsourced, morality falters. Thought becomes passive, guided by convenience or consensus rather than truth. Nelson urges reclaiming the ability to think independently, using the Trivium as a form of intellectual self-defence. The work concludes with an appeal to discipline and clarity. Thought is not merely mental activity but the act of aligning one's understanding with reality and one's actions with principle. In cultivating grammar, logic, and rhetoric as living skills, humans affirm their nature as moral beings capable of truth and meaning.

4. SMALL TALK

4.1. Phatic speech

(The ritual of speech: The social power of small talk)

'What we call trivial talk is not trivial at all: it is the ritual by which we affirm shared social order'.

— Michael Silverstein, The Culture of Communication

'The phatic function serves to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works'.

— Roman Jakobson, Linguistics and Poetics

Phatic function

In her article 'Exploring Jakobson's 'Phatic Function' in Instant Messaging Interactions[72]', Dipti Kulkarni examines how language functions not simply to convey information but to maintain contact between communicators in digital settings. Building on Roman Jakobson's theory, which describes the phatic function as a means of ensuring the channel of communication remains open, the study shifts focus to how such expressions operate in instant messaging—where non-verbal cues are absent and linguistic tokens take on the burden of sustaining interaction. Instant messaging, unlike face-to-face talk, is shaped by its asynchronicity and lack of physical presence. In this context, even a simple 'hmm' or 'ok' can carry significant communicative weight. These utterances may appear trivial or devoid of content, but their primary function is social. Kulkarni's analysis, drawn from a corpus of sixty chat logs in English, Hindi, and Marathi, reveals how users rely on phatic markers to establish, maintain, and close conversations—strategies that are far from incidental. Openings in IM often begin with greetings like 'Hi' or 'Hey', but many interactions dive straight into a topic, especially among close acquaintances or in work-related chats. This skipping of formal pleasantries does not indicate rudeness—it reflects a tacit understanding of shared context and mutual familiarity. The act of beginning a conversation in this way is itself phatic: a reaffirmation that the communicative link is active. The middle phase of conversations shows how language adapts

[72] Kulkarni, D. (2013) Exploring Jakobson's 'Phatic Function' in Instant Messaging Interactions, Discourse & Communication, SAGE Publications.

to the absence of tone, gesture, and expression. Minimalist back-channel responses ('hmm', 'k', 'lol') perform the essential task of confirming attention and engagement. Expressive interjections like 'wow', 'yikes', or 'aww' maintain emotional proximity between speakers, simulating the affirming nods or sympathetic expressions of physical interaction. Questions—especially those that do not demand real answers—function as contact-maintaining tools, signalling interest and keeping the exchange flowing. Closings are equally revealing. Some users engage in ritualised goodbyes—'bye', 'take care', 'ttyl'—while others simply vanish, ending the chat with silence. This inconsistency reflects the flexible, open-ended nature of IM conversations, where interactions are often continuous and fragmented, unlike the clearly bounded structure of spoken dialogues. Even an abrupt exit can be read as a phatic act, a silent understanding that the channel will remain open for future reconnection. What emerges from Kulkarni's research is the centrality of phatic communion in sustaining digital social life. These linguistic strategies, subtle and frequently overlooked, are not merely functional but socially vital. They maintain a sense of shared presence and attentiveness, even when nothing substantial is being said. Phatic expressions in digital communication are not ornamental. They are foundational to the way people sustain bonds in the increasingly text-based landscape of human interaction. The study invites us to rethink what counts as meaningful communication, suggesting that sometimes the mere act of showing up—linguistically—is enough to affirm the social thread that binds interlocutors together.

Phatic communion

Gunter Senft, in his discussion[73] of Bronisław Malinowski's concept of 'phatic communion', revisits one of the earliest attempts to understand language not as a tool for transmitting information but as a means of sustaining social ties. Originally introduced in Malinowski's 1923 essay 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages', 'phatic communion' refers to speech whose primary function is not to communicate ideas but to foster fellowship and relational continuity between speakers. Malinowski developed this theory during his fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders. His insights came not from abstract theorising but from translating magical formulae and observing daily speech acts. Unlike the Western assumption that language primarily conveys information, Malinowski argued that much of speech in everyday life serves to establish rapport. Remarks about the weather, polite greetings, and repeated expressions of concern like 'How are you?' are not inquiries in the literal sense, but rather linguistic rituals that reaffirm social connection. According to Malinowski, silence between people can be perceived as threatening. The 'communion of words', however trivial in content, signals safety and trust. This insight reoriented linguistic and anthropological thinking toward the social function of language and inspired Roman Jakobson to incorporate the phatic function into his model of communication. Jakobson categorised it as the use of language to open, maintain, or close a channel of communication. Although Jakobson's model popularised the term phatic communication, some scholars argue that 'communion', with its emphasis on human connection, better captures Malinowski's intent. Despite its foundational status, the concept has attracted critiques. Dell Hymes questioned its universality, pointing to cultures where silence is not seen as discomforting but as respectful or appropriate. For instance, among the Paliyans in South India, and the Wishram Chinook along the Columbia River, speech is restrained and often avoided unless necessary. David Crystal similarly noted cultural variation in the form and content of phatic expressions. While British small talk often revolves around the weather, Rundi women in Burundi part with references to household duties. These

[73] Senft, G. (1986) Phatic Communion, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen.

examples show that the function of phatic communion may be consistent across cultures, but the form it takes is deeply embedded in local norms and values. The idea that phatic speech lacks content has also been challenged. Among the Trobriand Islanders, the common greeting 'ambeya' ('where are you going?') serves not only to establish a social bond but also to exchange relevant information about one's location or intentions. It combines the affective with the pragmatic, reminding us that even seemingly empty phrases can carry dual functions—relational and informational. Later scholars such as John Laver expanded the theory to include the transitional phases of interaction—greetings, small talk, farewells—that help manage social distance and psychological comfort. Florian Coulmas added that phatic language reflects social hierarchies and expectations, as seen in culturally loaded apologies or ritual expressions. Phatic communion, then, is more than idle chatter. It is a subtle mechanism through which humans confirm their shared presence, maintain cohesion, and navigate the boundaries of interaction. Though often overlooked, these communicative rituals form the architecture of social life, revealing the depth of meaning in words spoken just to speak.

Small talk in the digital age

In their article 'Small Talk in the Digital Age: Making Sense of Phatic Posts[74]', Danica Radovanovic and Massimo Ragnedda explore how social media platforms are reshaping traditional notions of conversation. Drawing on Bronislaw Malinowski's concept of 'phatic communion' and Roman Jakobson's 'phatic function' of language, they argue that the seemingly trivial, non-informational posts people share online—such as 'Good morning!' or 'Coffee time'—serve essential social purposes in maintaining human connection. Phatic posts, unlike content designed to convey information or persuade, are aimed at affirming presence and maintaining relationships. A 'like' on a friend's post, a one-word comment, or a shared meme may appear empty of substance, but these micro-interactions mimic nods, smiles, or greetings in face-to-face conversation. They confirm that the social line is still open, that someone is there and paying attention. In the digital world, these gestures are essential to reinforcing what the authors call 'networked sociality'—a distributed sense of belonging mediated by platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The motivations behind these phatic posts are manifold. One is the desire to signal presence. A short update or emoji may serve as a low-effort way to announce that one is online and emotionally available. Another motive is to build intimacy through the mundane. By sharing snippets of daily life, users invite others into their routine, using banality as a tool of emotional closeness. Even a status like 'watching the rain' offers a small window into someone's experience, enough to draw in a response and keep the digital thread alive. The article also highlights how technology itself shapes this behaviour. Features such as the 'like' button, stories, or check-ins encourage communication that is quick and frictionless. These lightweight exchanges are not accidental but are structurally incentivised by the design of platforms, which prioritise engagement and social feedback loops over depth of content. In a world where attention is scarce, phatic posts allow users to stay socially relevant without the demands of extended conversation. Radovanovic and Ragnedda pay special attention to younger users who often use phatic communication in coded ways. Teenagers, for example, may post vague or symbolic messages to express feelings or maintain peer bonds while avoiding direct statements. This kind of indirect social signalling reflects not only digital literacy but also a deep understanding of how to navigate public and private spaces simultaneously. The phatic post, then, is not meaningless. It is a gesture—a nod across a

[74] Radovanovic, D. and Ragnedda, M. (2022) Small Talk in the Digital Age: Making Sense of Phatic Posts, University of Belgrade & University of Sassari.

crowded digital room. It maintains the rhythm of social life online, sustaining ties, avoiding silence, and reminding others that one is still there. As human interaction becomes more mediated by screens, these small moments carry unexpected weight.

Meaning in primitive languages

In his supplementary essay 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages' (1923), Bronisław Malinowski challenges conventional theories that regard language as merely a conduit for thought. Instead, he argues that language derives its meaning from use, function, and the specific social contexts in which it appears. Language, in his view, is not a passive reflection of ideas but a form of action deeply embedded in cultural life. Malinowski begins by aligning himself with Ogden and Richards' broader theory of symbolism, emphasising that linguistic meaning cannot be grasped in isolation. He insists that a scientific understanding of language, especially for unwritten or 'primitive' languages, requires attention to what he terms the 'context of situation'. Words spoken by members of a community only make sense when seen in relation to the practical, emotional, and ritual environments in which they are uttered. Unlike the abstract, dictionary-based understanding of language common in Western philosophy, Malinowski's focus is on the lived experience of communication. He asserts that so-called primitive languages do not exist to express detached ideas but rather to perform essential human tasks: coordinating work, expressing feelings, maintaining social bonds. In this sense, language is an instrument of human action. Early speech, he notes, often consists of gestures, repetitions, exclamations, and rhythm—tools for interaction more than reflection. Even children, he observes, learn language not through logical deduction but through repeated exposure in specific social and emotional contexts. This understanding complicates the task of translation. A word in one language might be steeped in social rituals or local beliefs, making it nearly impossible to render in a language like English without lengthy explanation. For example, certain terms among the Trobriand Islanders refer to specific practices of exchange or magic that have no equivalent in modern industrial societies. Ethnographic work, then, must do more than decode words—it must also describe the cultural practices that give those words their meaning. One of Malinowski's more intriguing insights concerns the magical quality attributed to words in many traditional societies. Language is often treated as a force in itself—a means of influencing the world. From spells to blessings, these uses suggest that for many communities, speech is not a symbol of power but power itself. This attitude, he warns, can still be found today in the belief that language somehow reflects reality perfectly or that naming something gives one control over it. He also notes how grammatical structures reflect real, lived categories: objects and actions, persons, and commands. Unlike the neat grammatical divisions of Western languages, so-called primitive tongues often mix and bend these categories, prioritising function over form. Malinowski presents a vision of language as a practical, embedded, and symbolic tool—shaped by the needs and activities of human beings rather than by abstract logic. His work contributes not just to anthropology or linguistics, but to a broader understanding of how meaning itself arises from doing, not simply from thinking.

Phatic interpretations

In their influential article 'Phatic Interpretations and Phatic Communication[75]', Vlad Žegarac and Billy Clark revisit the traditional concept of phatic communication, proposing a

[75] Žegarac, V. and Clark, B. (2019). Phatic interpretations and phatic communication. Openrepository.com. [online] doi:https://doi.org/0022-2267.

cognitive approach grounded in Relevance Theory. Rather than seeing phatic utterances as merely polite or socially obligatory, they argue these interactions are underpinned by deeper mental processes that help individuals interpret communicative intentions. The authors challenge the long-standing assumption that phatic communication is superficial or secondary. Instead, they suggest it should be viewed as a complex form of meaning-making, where utterances are interpreted less for their propositional content and more for the intentions they signal. Phrases like 'How are you?' or 'Nice weather today' may appear empty, but Žegarac and Clark reveal how such statements carry implicatures—meanings derived from context rather than literal content. They introduce several key distinctions. A 'phatic interpretation' focuses on the speaker's intention to communicate rather than the explicit message. A 'phatic utterance' is any expression designed to provoke such an interpretation. And 'phatic communication' refers broadly to the entire interaction aimed at establishing, maintaining, or negotiating a social connection. This redefinition allows phatic talk to be seen not as filler, but as essential to managing relationships. Importantly, the paper emphasises that phaticness exists on a spectrum. Not all statements are purely or entirely phatic. A remark might begin as a greeting but evolve into meaningful dialogue depending on the context and the participants' responsiveness. In this way, phatic utterances are dynamic: they invite a particular kind of attention to interpersonal context and emotional resonance, often functioning as tests of social rapport. Žegarac and Clark also explore how context and relationship dynamics affect interpretation. In moments of tension or emotional distance, even a simple 'hello' can take on heightened significance. The fact that communication occurs at all may be more telling than the words exchanged. Conversely, in close relationships, certain phrases become ritualised but still meaningful in signalling presence and continuity. The authors use scenes from films like 'Groundhog Day' to illustrate how phatic exchanges operate. In these examples, characters often rely on routine, repetitive speech to maintain civility, mask discomfort, or create openings for further interaction. Even empty-sounding lines carry social and emotional weight. Another innovation in their analysis is the inclusion of non-ostensive and covert phatic communication. Not all phatic acts are direct or obvious. Subtle cues—glances, gestures, or silences—can perform the same function, suggesting that someone is open to interaction or seeking acknowledgment. Such moments demonstrate that phatic communication is not restricted to words but includes a broad range of semiotic behaviour. Žegarac and Clark's work reframes phatic speech as a meaningful part of human cognition and interaction. By applying Relevance Theory, they show that even the most mundane utterance may carry implicit intentions, requiring interpretation that draws on both cognitive effort and social understanding. Far from being trivial, phatic communication reveals the subtle interplay between thought, speech, and the social world.

Design of community

The paper from Kevin Makice 'Phatics and the Design of Community[76]' explores how Twitter, as a platform for lightweight, relational communication, can support and enhance community awareness. Rather than focusing on the informational content of posts, the study emphasises the phatic function of communication—language whose primary purpose is to maintain social bonds. Drawing on Jakobson's framework and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research, it presents phatic interaction as a core principle for designing socially aware

[76] Makice, K. (2009). Phatics and the design of community. CHI '09 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems, pp.3133–3136. doi:https://doi.org/10.1145/1520340.1520445.

digital environments. Twitter provides a compelling case for understanding how phatic exchanges—brief updates, likes, retweets, or emoji responses—can nurture both strong and weak social ties. Unlike face-to-face communication, which traditionally builds strong relationships, platforms like Twitter allow users to maintain loose connections across broad networks. These weak ties, once dismissed as insignificant, are now recognised for their capacity to expand access to resources, ideas, and opportunities. They serve as bridges between communities, fostering connectivity without the pressures of deep engagement. One of the central ideas in the study is that phatic communication should not be viewed as noise or triviality. On the contrary, these small acts of acknowledgment—whether a tweet, a like, or a glance at a shared display—play an essential role in shaping communal awareness. Just as saying 'hello' in a hallway serves to affirm presence and social continuity, micro-interactions online function to maintain social cohesion. They indicate that people are present, attentive, and willing to engage. To illustrate this, the study presents several HCI projects designed around phatic principles. One example, 'The Cube', used personalised visual codes to facilitate simple, supportive messages among users. Another, 'SynchroMate', allowed couples to send signals via vibrations and colours to express mood or presence without needing full conversation. These systems demonstrate how phatic technologies complement more content-heavy communication, reinforcing emotional or social proximity through minimal interaction. The study also highlights TwitterSpaces, a 2008 university-based installation where tweets from students, alumni, and faculty were displayed in shared physical areas. This created a kind of digital town square, allowing community members to casually observe each other's activities. Although it did not increase foot traffic, it did significantly improve awareness and connection within the academic environment. Such installations reveal how visualising phatic interaction can make social ties more tangible and encourage participation. The river metaphor applied in Twitter stream analysis captures how users navigate streams of information. These personal information streams (PInS) are not merely informational; they are curated flows of relational gestures. Understanding these streams helps explain how users participate in social networks not just by exchanging content, but by sustaining social presence and continuity. Ultimately, the thesis argues for the design of sociable systems that acknowledge the rhythms of connection and disconnection inherent in human relationships. Phatic communication, often overlooked, emerges as a foundational element of digital sociability. It is a way of being with others, however briefly, in a world increasingly defined by dislocation and rapid exchange.

Communication as phatic

In the evolving landscape of digital communication, the role of the professional communicator is shifting. Rather than merely transmitting information or persuading audiences, communication increasingly serves a relational purpose: establishing and sustaining social presence. The article 'Professional Communication as Phatic: From Classical Eunoia to Personal Artificial Intelligence[77]' by Karen Schriver repositions phatic communication as a core function of professional discourse, especially in online and intercultural settings. Traditionally viewed as trivial or secondary, phatic communication involves speech acts that express sociability rather than content. From a simple 'hello' in an email to the use of emojis in a user help forum, these interactions are less about information and more about connection. Drawing

[77] Porter, J.E. (2017). Professional Communication as Phatic: From Classical 'Eunoia' to Personal Artificial Intelligence.. Business and Professional Communication Quarterly, [online] 80(2), pp.174–193. Available at: https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1144575 [Accessed 18 Jul. 2025].

on Malinowski's foundational theory of phatic communion and Jakobson's later linguistic typology, Schriver argues that the function of phatic communication should be elevated to a primary objective in digital professional environments. The article connects phaticity to classical rhetoric, particularly the Greek concept of 'eunoia'—goodwill between speaker and audience. Ancient rhetoricians like Aristotle and Cicero understood that emotional and ethical bonds underpin effective persuasion. This goodwill, Schriver suggests, is echoed today in the role of phatic discourse: not as idle chatter but as a vital precondition for meaningful communication in professional life. Email exchanges, for instance, often neglect this function, resulting in messages that appear cold or detached. Including brief but sincere greetings or personal touches helps establish rapport, particularly in global communication where cultural expectations may differ. Schriver points out that what may seem like redundancy to some—such as formal greetings or small talk—is often a crucial act of respect in other cultures. Virtual teamwork especially benefits from phatic interactions. Distributed teams rely on a shared sense of presence and trust, built not just through performance metrics but also through regular, casual communication. Even seemingly minor interactions like brief check-ins or friendly comments can solidify group cohesion, making collaboration smoother and more humane. In user forums and help communities, phatic exchanges create an atmosphere of openness. Instead of treating help requests as technical problems to solve, moderators and participants often begin with greetings, affirmations, or encouragement. This establishes a welcoming tone and encourages user participation, turning isolated inquiries into shared experiences. Schriver also explores the rise of AI-powered 'phatic bots', which simulate human interaction in professional and customer service settings. These bots, like Xiaoice or scheduling assistants like Amy from x.ai, are designed to maintain relational continuity with minimal content. However, the ethical implications are complex: as these systems mimic empathy and social awareness, there is a risk of creating synthetic relationships that blur the boundary between sincere and simulated care. The article argues for integrating phatic awareness into communication design. Professional communicators must become curators of social engagement, not just transmitters of facts. Phatic communication reinforces the human element in a world increasingly mediated by screens and algorithms, reminding us that the essence of professionalism lies not only in clarity or accuracy, but in connection.

4.2. Banal speech

(Banality of belonging: Language without meaning, presence without depth)

'Superficial talk is not the enemy of connection—it is often its quiet foundation'.

— Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

'Banality is not the absence of meaning, but the repetition of meaning until it becomes invisible'.

— Roland Barthes, Mythologies

Banality

The word 'banal' carries the connotation of something trite, dull, or unremarkably common. But its origins reveal a more layered and historical sense of meaning. Emerging from

the French banal, the term initially referred to things tied to feudal authority—specifically, communal facilities mandated by a lord's decree. From the Old French banel, meaning 'communal' or 'pertaining to the decree', it derives from the Germanic root bannan, meaning 'to speak publicly' or 'to issue a proclamation'. In medieval life, this public proclamation established obligations—restrictions that compelled peasants to use the services and tools of their feudal superiors. Such declarations gave rise to banalités in France: feudal dues and monopolies that dictated the daily economic life of serfs. A peasant was not free to grind grain in a hand mill or bake bread in a personal oven. Instead, they had to use the four banal—the communal oven owned by the local lord—and pay for it. The same applied to the mill and the wine press. Even animal breeding was regulated under 'banalité de tor et ver', restricting who could own bulls or boars. These rights not only asserted economic control but also preserved a visible, repetitive social hierarchy. This feudal system of enforced sameness—where every loaf of bread, sack of flour, or jug of wine passed through the lord's sanctioned mechanism—slowly evolved in language to represent not just common use, but something worn-out and devoid of individuality. 'Banal' thus slid from its legal and communal origin into a cultural descriptor for anything overly familiar, lacking originality, or stripped of particularity. The peasant's compulsory routine echoed in the word's semantic shift toward describing dull repetitions of thought, speech, or action. Interestingly, some of these communal constraints had pragmatic value. In New France, for instance, the required use of the seigneurial mill ensured the building and upkeep of reliable flour mills, which also doubled as defensive structures. In this context, the banalité was not merely a burden, but part of a system of shared infrastructure and survival. Nonetheless, the broader sentiment remained: the banality imposed from above dulled not just economic freedom but human expression itself. By the time the French Revolution erupted, banalités became a symbol of everything archaic and oppressive in the Ancien régime. Their abolition on August 4, 1789, was a decisive blow against the embedded networks of aristocratic privilege. Though compensation was granted to some lords until 1793, the deeper significance lay in the symbolic gesture: the rejection of the compulsion to conform, to follow dictated rhythms, and to participate in preordained, communal monotony. Today, to call something 'banal' is to accuse it of offering nothing new—of being a tired echo of a once-enforced structure. But underneath that accusation lies a history of control, of the transformation of speech and decree into an architecture of habit, and of how structures of utility can degenerate into patterns of thoughtless repetition.

Banal nationalism

Michael Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism', developed in his 1995 book 'Banal Nationalism[78]', redefined how scholars think about the everyday reproduction of national identity. Rather than limiting nationalism to dramatic political events or extremist ideologies, Billig focused on the subtle cues embedded in daily life—mundane practices that quietly affirm the nation's presence without drawing attention to themselves. These are the unnoticed flags on public buildings, the weather forecasts that speak only of 'our country', and the default use of national symbols on money, stamps, or sports teams. The power of banal nationalism lies in its invisibility. Unlike overt or 'hot' nationalism, which may provoke controversy, banal nationalism appears natural and unremarkable. Yet it operates continuously, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging through habits and linguistic choices. When a citizen refers to 'our government' or cheers for 'our team' at an international event, a national identity is being reaffirmed, even if unconsciously. These seemingly apolitical acts are crucial to sustaining the

[78] Billig, M. (1995) Banal Nationalism. London: SAGE Publications.

idea of the nation-state. Billig's work challenged the optimism of the 1990s, when many scholars believed that nationalism was in decline due to globalisation. Ulrich Beck, for instance, argued that a new era of 'banal cosmopolitanism' was emerging, where global identities would replace national ones. But Billig was sceptical of this assumption, warning that nationalism was not disappearing—it was becoming more deeply woven into the everyday fabric of life. Events in the decades since, including the rise of populist nationalism and stricter immigration policies, have proven him right. Banal nationalism is not merely benign. Billig argued that its quiet omnipresence can serve as a base for more aggressive forms of nationalism. When people become accustomed to thinking in national terms, it becomes easier to draw stark boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Even peaceful symbols can be mobilised in support of exclusion, conflict, or xenophobia. The same school ritual that teaches national pride may also reinforce the belief that outsiders do not belong. One of the key contributions of 'Banal Nationalism' was to shift the focus from the spectacular to the ordinary. Instead of asking when nationalism appears, Billig asked where it hides. This approach inspired a wave of scholarship exploring how nationalism is performed, reinforced, and contested in everyday contexts. For instance, national identity can be seen in how people use language, consume media, or define citizenship. It is expressed not only through state institutions but also through the choices and practices of individuals. Billig later acknowledged that his binary distinction between 'hot' and 'banal' nationalism was too rigid. These forms often overlap. A news article may calmly report on government policy while subtly reinforcing nationalist assumptions. A protest might invoke patriotic language in both radical and routine ways. Nationalism, in this view, operates along a spectrum rather than in distinct categories. What makes Billig's concept enduring is its insistence that nationalism remains central—not as an outdated relic, but as a living structure that shapes how people imagine politics and community. It continues to define who counts as 'the people', whose voices matter, and what kinds of futures are possible.

Banal cosmopolitanism

Ingrid Piller's analysis of multilingual 'welcome' signs, in her article 'Banal Cosmopolitanism: The Illusion of Multilingual 'Welcome' Signs[79]', offers a compelling critique of how linguistic tokens of inclusion can, paradoxically, expose the shallow performance of diversity. These signs, which appear in airports, shopping centres, universities, and other public venues, claim to greet all visitors regardless of language or origin. Yet, their presence often communicates less about hospitality and more about a desire to appear globally minded—a display meant more for the self-image of the host than for the practical or emotional benefit of the guest. Piller traces the history of this phenomenon with a revealing anecdote from the 1970s, when a traveller in Japan, armed only with a Latin-script map, found himself lost among signs in Japanese. The only legible message was 'Welcome!'—a word that, while friendly, offered no actual help in navigation. This story becomes an allegory for today's globalised landscapes, where superficial gestures toward inclusion—especially through language—frequently fail to support genuine understanding. This form of empty hospitality is what Piller calls 'banal cosmopolitanism', borrowing from Michael Billig's idea of 'banal nationalism', in which flags or anthems silently reinforce identity without conscious reflection. In the cosmopolitan version, the symbols are less about national unity and more about suggesting international openness. Signs in multiple languages, stylised foreign scripts, and culturally ambiguous branding all

[79] Piller, I. (2017). Banal cosmopolitanism. [online] Language on the Move. Available at: https://www.languageonthemove.com/banal-cosmopolitanism/ [Accessed 18 Jul. 2025].

serve to affirm a community's commitment to diversity, at least on the surface. The irony is that these signs often fail to communicate with the very people they ostensibly address. Poorly executed translations, misrendered scripts, and incorrect formatting—especially of right-to-left languages like Arabic or Persian—betray a lack of cultural competence. A 'welcome' sign at the University of Limerick, for instance, butchered the Persian phrase 'خوش آمدید' by re-ordering the letters from left to right using Google Translate, rendering it meaningless. Such errors do not merely fail in communication; they turn a message of inclusion into one of exclusion and embarrassment. Piller argues that the real function of these signs is symbolic reassurance for the dominant local population. They declare, 'We are open, tolerant, globally aware', but they do so in a way that requires no deep engagement with the languages or cultures they reference. The foreign words become ornamental, like decorative motifs in a corporate lobby, rather than tools for meaningful interaction. For actual speakers of these languages, the message can feel alienating—a token of welcome that simultaneously signals disinterest in the authenticity of their voice. Rather than fostering true multilingual communication, these signs commodify language into a global aesthetic. Their prevalence signals not a deep respect for diversity, but a stylised performance of it. In this way, banal cosmopolitanism does not dismantle linguistic barriers; it paints over them with a thin coat of inclusive imagery that reassures the majority and mystifies the rest.

Digital banal

In 'The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture[80]', Zara Dinnen explores how digital technologies shape life so seamlessly that they become invisible. The concept of the 'digital banal' captures this condition—where the digital is no longer extraordinary but embedded in ordinary, daily interactions. Smartphones, social media, and algorithms mediate experience, yet their influence is rarely acknowledged. Their invisibility is not accidental but structural, sustained by narratives that present technological change as neutral or inevitable. Dinnen argues that digital interfaces, like those of Facebook or Google, disguise their mediation. They appear as natural extensions of human connection rather than systems of control. For instance, when Apple declared the iPhone 4 would 'change everything', it framed radical transformation as routine progress. This sleight of hand reframes novelty as banality and innovation as expectation. Similarly, metaphors like 'the Cloud' erase the physical and ecological costs of digital infrastructure—data centres, energy use, rare minerals—while fostering a sense of abstract, frictionless convenience. In fiction, this dynamic is reflected in the way digital life appears backgrounded. Novels like A.M. Homes's 'May We Be Forgiven' include emails, searches, and texts without fanfare, as if these interactions were unremarkable. Yet, it is precisely through these details that the digital banal is revealed. Dinnen draws on Roland Barthes's notion of the 'reality effect', where minor, realist details bolster believability. In the same way, a character's quiet use of Google makes the digital seem real and mundane, even as it marks a significant shift in how people think, relate, and act. Facebook, for Dinnen, exemplifies the digital banal. Its platform creates the illusion of constant presence and emotional intimacy while in fact fostering detachment, algorithmic curation, and shallow interaction. The result is what Katherine Losse calls 'noncommittal proximity'—a kind of social life mediated by screens, stripped of emotional depth but filled with the appearance of engagement. This banality of connection normalises a new mode of sociality: always on, always curated, but emotionally muted. The digital banal is not merely aesthetic or cultural—it has

[80] Dinnen, Z. (2018). The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture. Columbia University Press.

political consequences. The invisibility of digital systems hides the labour behind platforms, the environmental cost of devices, and the economic structures that sustain them. This invisibility allows exploitative and extractive systems to flourish unchallenged. Dinnen shows how literature and film can recover the novelty hidden in digital banality, not by dramatising technology itself, but by foregrounding its unspoken effects. Works like *The Social Network* or 'Chronic City' dramatise how code, infrastructure, and mediation shape contemporary life—even when their mechanisms remain unseen. Ultimately, Dinnen's concept invites a different kind of reading—not only of texts, but of everyday life. By paying attention to how the digital banal operates, people can better understand the political, emotional, and ecological stakes of living within systems designed to disappear. In making the unnoticed visible, 'The Digital Banal' opens space for the planned banality of digital language.

Against banality

Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation radically alters how one understands reality, power, and resistance in contemporary life. In William Pawlett's 'Baudrillard Against Banality[81]', the idea of simulation is not merely a media phenomenon but a total transformation in how meaning operates. The world no longer reflects or distorts a stable real; it generates its own hyperreality—an environment of pure signs referring only to other signs. This condition replaces the real with an endless circulation of images, effects, and codes that appear more vivid, seductive, and authoritative than any supposed original. Baudrillard identifies three historical orders of simulacra. The first is the counterfeit, emerging in the Renaissance, where signs still referred to an external real—imitations of nature or divine order. The second is the age of production, shaped by industrial capitalism, where signs reproduce models and become standardised commodities. The third is simulation, in which signs no longer point outward but form closed systems of reference. At this stage, the real disappears. Reality is neither denied nor distorted—it becomes irrelevant. Advertising, media, and branding do not hide the truth; they eliminate the need for it. This hyperreal world is not chaotic but governed by the 'code'—a logic of digital equivalence that reduces meaning to data, circulation, and predictability. Algorithms, genetic codes, financial formulas, and surveillance systems map and reproduce life with extraordinary precision. But their precision is hollow. The code does not clarify reality—it replaces it. Instead of participating in meaning-making, people become data points in a system that simulates choice, freedom, and individuality while neutralising difference. The masses in Baudrillard's theory are not heroic revolutionaries nor manipulated victims. They are indifferent. In their silence and refusal to respond, they exceed representation. They absorb meaning and give nothing back. This passivity is not weakness but a form of defiance—a strategy against the saturation of signs. The public's hyperconformity, irony, and even apathy are not failures to engage but tactics that short-circuit the system's demands for visibility and interaction. In this framework, political action becomes simulacra. Elections simulate choice. Opinion polls simulate discourse. Protest becomes part of the spectacle. Resistance, then, cannot take the form of critique, which is quickly commodified and absorbed. True disruption occurs not through oppositional politics but through symbolic acts that resist translation into value: silence, disappearance, refusal, or excessive gestures that defy utility. Baudrillard's position is not nihilistic but diagnostic. He exposes how the banalisation of reality—its conversion into signs, its absorption into images—erodes meaning while maintaining the

[81] Pawlett, W. (2007). Jean Baudrillard. Routledge eBooks. Informa. doi:https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203937365.

illusion of communication. By naming this process, he also gestures toward its limits. In a world where the real is abolished by simulation, the very act of disengaging from the logic of equivalence becomes a form of resistance. The end of the social, for Baudrillard, is not a disappearance but a metamorphosis—one where the possibility of symbolic rupture still flickers within the hyperreal. Baudrillard's theory of simulacra reveals the banality of language in a world where meaning is endlessly recycled. Words no longer refer to reality but only to other signs within closed systems of simulation. Language, once tied to truth or presence, now floats freely, producing the illusion of meaning while concealing its absence. In hyperreality, speech becomes routine, coded, and performative—stripped of symbolic depth. The modern subject does not speak to reveal but to repeat, to circulate linguistic fragments. Communication becomes mechanical, predictable, and fragile—a surface play of familiar signs that replaces genuine expression with the dull hum of simulation.

Banal language

In the chapter 'Chronic Problems, Banal Language, and Contradictory Beliefs' from the book 'Political Language[82]'(2013) Murray Edelman is tracing the persistence of economic and social inequality through centuries of American history. Despite moments of reform and technological progress, the fundamental disparities in wealth, dignity, and autonomy remain intact. What allows this inequality to persist, according to the article, is not only structural rigidity but also the ways language distorts how people perceive and respond to injustice. Inequality is not simply a matter of uneven wealth distribution—it is entangled with chronic social issues like poverty, crime, and lack of opportunity. These problems are often framed in ways that locate the fault within individuals instead of within systems. Poverty becomes a sign of personal failure; crime becomes a pathology of certain communities. This framing obscures how entrenched inequality creates the conditions that breed such outcomes in the first place. The language of social discourse plays a quiet but decisive role. Phrases like 'the disadvantaged' or 'those in need' soften the violence of inequality. Banal expressions strip the urgency from systemic injustice. Rather than naming exploitation or structural violence, the discussion is couched in euphemisms that render inequality a natural, almost inevitable feature of life. This dulls outrage, narrows moral horizons, and allows people to accept contradictions without question. For instance, societies may claim to believe in equality of opportunity while tolerating vast and growing gaps in income and access. They may celebrate meritocracy while ignoring the ways in which starting points are anything but equal. These contradictions are rarely addressed head-on because the discourse surrounding them has been carefully managed through a technocratic and depersonalised vocabulary. The bureaucratic tone makes inequality appear as a policy challenge rather than a moral crisis. From the 17th century to today, inequality in the United States has remained remarkably stable. Even efforts like the War on Poverty did little to disrupt the deeper structures that support economic disparity. This historical inertia signals that inequality is not just a failure of policy, but of imagination—a refusal to think or speak about inequality in terms that compel action. When language fails to convey the human cost of inequality, when it masks contradiction with empty jargon, it does more than obscure reality—it helps sustain it. A change in policy will not be enough unless accompanied by a change in how people talk about inequality. Without naming injustice clearly, it becomes harder to challenge. Confronting inequality demands more than better statistics or efficiency; it requires a moral reawakening. That starts with language. If people continue to describe systemic injustice with phrases that soothe rather than reveal, the contradictions will endure, and the

[82] Edelman, M. (2013). Political Language. Elsevier.

structures that uphold them will remain untouched. The banality of official language lies in its power to evoke strong beliefs while concealing its own emptiness.

Poetics of banality

In 'Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire[83]', Saikat Majumdar explores how colonial modernity transformed the ordinary into an aesthetic and political terrain. Through a wide-ranging study of modernist and postcolonial literature, he shows how banality, boredom, and repetition shaped both the experience and narration of the colonial condition. Far from being passive or empty, the banal becomes a force that reveals and resists imperial hierarchies. Majumdar begins with a key insight: in colonial literature, the mundane is not a failure of imagination but a structure of feeling. Writers like Katherine Mansfield, James Joyce, and Amit Chaudhuri depict colonial life as marked by a tension between stasis and longing. Mansfield's characters, shaped by the barren routines of settler life, dream of a fuller experience in the imperial centre. Yet this desire is continually deferred. The everyday rhythms of the colony mirror the political distance from power and cultural recognition. Banality, in this sense, becomes a way to inhabit and narrate exclusion. Drawing from Sianne Ngai's theory of 'noncathartic' affects, Majumdar argues that boredom is not simply dullness but a condition of modernity. In modernist fiction, especially in the colonial context, boredom reflects a confrontation with the limits of meaning and transcendence. Joyce's 'Dubliners', for example, turns everyday failures into aesthetic form, where deflated epiphanies reveal both desire and futility. Similarly, Mansfield's prose transforms settler monotony into emotional tension, refusing the narrative closure typical of imperial romance. Majumdar traces the etymology of 'banality' to feudal obligation, highlighting how its meaning evolved from shared use to aesthetic dismissal. This shift parallels the rise of the novel, which in the Enlightenment tradition embraced the ordinary as worthy of narration. Yet modernism turns this gesture inside out. Writers like Woolf critique realist fidelity to detail, not to abandon the banal, but to reimagine it. Banality becomes a site of experimentation, fragmenting traditional narrative and exposing the structures that constrain inner life. In colonial and postcolonial contexts, this transformation takes on a political charge. The monotony of life under empire—its repetitions, delays, and exclusions—becomes the raw material for narrative. Banality is not just aesthetic; it is historical. It registers the slow violence of domination and the quiet resistance of form. Postcolonial writers use the banal to dismantle the grandeur of imperial discourse, showing how modernity's promise of progress was unevenly distributed, often leaving its subjects suspended in waiting. Majumdar's account situates the aesthetics of banality at the intersection of narrative, affect, and empire. The ordinary becomes not a retreat from politics, but a way to register its most intimate effects. The banality of colonial modernity reveals how boredom can become a mode of critique—of both Enlightenment ideals and the imperial realities that betrayed them. The poetics of banality serves as a literary device to expose the flattening effects of official language. By mimicking its empty cadences—its ritualised phrasing, formulaic rhythms, and hollow certainty—writers can reveal how institutional speech masks its own vacuity. To engage banality critically is to make its dead metaphors speak again.

[83] Majumdar, S. (2013) Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire. New York: Columbia University Press.

Reproductions of banality

In 'Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life[84]', Alice Yaeger Kaplan examines how fascism infiltrates cultural sensibility not through overt violence alone but through ordinary life, aesthetic forms, and shared emotional codes. Her analysis challenges the dominant interpretation of fascism as a wholly political or ideological phenomenon, arguing instead that it is a structure of feeling—a desire embedded in the everyday. Kaplan shifts the discourse on fascism from abstract political theory to the textures of lived experience. In early 20th-century France, fascism found expression in literary styles, radio broadcasts, films, and even household imagery. These cultural forms were not simply vehicles for fascist content; they were the very grammar through which fascist longing spoke. By focusing on the banal—what is repetitive, familiar, and domestic—Kaplan reveals the power of fascism to disguise itself as normality. She draws attention to how appliances, interiors, sound technologies, and slogans shape a mood of submission and collective identity, not through coercion, but through the comforting repetition of belonging. Kaplan also critiques the intellectual tradition of interpreting fascism primarily through exceptional thinkers. Instead of privileging canonical figures or great ideological texts, she examines the 'middlebrow' literature and cultural forms where fascism becomes intimate. In this context, writers like Céline or Brasillach are not isolated cranks but indicators of a larger cultural disposition. The anti-Semitism in Céline's writing, for instance, functions less as an ideological tract than as a symptom of a mood, a rhythm of resentment that emerges in repetitive, vulgar invective. This banality is not incidental; it is the mechanism through which hatred becomes habitual. The theoretical pivot in Kaplan's book comes from her reworking of the concept of banality itself. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's critique of aestheticised politics, she counters Hannah Arendt's reading of Adolf Eichmann as a hollow bureaucrat embodying the 'banality of evil'. Arendt's formulation, though powerful, risks pathologising fascism as stupidity or lack of imagination. Kaplan instead insists that banality is a deliberate strategy. Through repetition, cliché, and intimacy, fascism normalises exclusion, hierarchy, and violence. Its power lies in the blurring of politics and aesthetics, where listening to a radio broadcast or admiring a furnished apartment becomes participation in a worldview. French fascism, she argues, was particularly shaped by the interplay between modernism and antimodernism. It both embraced modern technology and longed for archaic community. The cult of the leader, the glorification of youth, and the aesthetic of discipline fused mechanisation with nostalgia. Fascist aesthetics thus oscillated between the future and the past, offering a totalising vision that reconciled opposites—mass participation and elite control, innovation, and tradition. Kaplan's intervention lies in showing how ideology is not merely a doctrine, but an affective practice. Fascism persists in rhythms, voices, objects, and dreams. Its survival depends less on belief than on habituation. Recognising fascism means tuning into its quiet repetitions, its appeals to community, its invocation of the maternal and the virile, and its strange comfort. Official discourse does not illuminate; it repeats, reassures, and neutralises. It stabilises appearance, not to reflect truth, but to suppress uncertainty. Its authority lies not in insight but in the dead weight of convention. Language becomes a spectacle of coherence—evocative yet vacant, objective in tone but saturated with institutional bias. Rather than clarify, it obscures; rather than persuade, it performs. As Arendt observed, in political life, being and appearance merge—official language becomes a choreography of sense, not a revelation of meaning.

[84] Alice Yaeger Kaplan (1986). Reproductions of Banality. U of Minnesota Press.

4.3. The evil of banality

(The routine of speech: How language becomes complicit)

'The most ordinary words are soaked in ideology; banality is often the disguise of power'.

— Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power

The evil of banality

In 'The Evil of Banality: On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking[85]', Elizabeth Minnich offers a sobering meditation on how ordinary people come to commit extraordinary harm. Drawing on philosophical reflections and historical examples, the book is a continuation of Hannah Arendt's claim that the gravest evils may not come from monsters but from people who fail—or refuse—to think. The central thesis is simple yet deeply unsettling: people who are not thinking are capable of anything. This is not an accusation of stupidity or ignorance, but of moral disengagement. Minnich insists that atrocities do not require rage or sadism. They can proceed through the quiet obedience of everyday roles—jobs done efficiently, goals met, targets achieved. It is not evil in its mythic, demonic form, but in its trivial, routinised, bureaucratic appearance. The Rwandan genocide is one of Minnich's key examples. A man recalls killing a neighbour, someone whose name he knew, and then casually recounting the event to his wife before going to sleep. He was not driven by personal hatred. He was simply following what had become the rules of his world. The horror lies not in his emotion but in the absence of it—in the smooth integration of violence into the routines of daily life. Minnich examines this pattern across different historical contexts. From Eichmann in Nazi Germany to Eugene de Kock during apartheid South Africa, she shows that evil often operates under the mask of ordinariness. What these individuals had in common was not ideological fervour but a desire to conform, to do their job well, to meet expectations without asking too many questions. One of the most chilling insights is how conventional tools of success and motivation can be turned to destructive ends. Charles Manson adapted self-help principles to control his followers. Eichmann, as David Cesarani notes, was not originally a committed Nazi. He became a key figure in genocide because he was a competent administrator—someone who took pride in organising and solving problems. The more efficient he became, the deeper he embedded himself in the machinery of mass death. What connects these stories is the absence of reflective thinking. Minnich does not suggest that every thoughtless person will commit atrocities. But she argues that large-scale evil requires this very condition: a culture in which questioning is rare, where clichés and norms replace genuine deliberation, and where people defer to rules even when those rules lead to destruction. To resist such evil, then, one must think. Not just technically or strategically, but morally—thinking with others in mind. This kind of thinking is a political act. It refuses the comfort of slogans, the ease of conformity, and the safety of silence. It challenges systems that normalise harm. Minnich's book urges people to cultivate habits of attention and reflection, especially in a world where routine can so easily become complicity. The banality of official language fosters moral disengagement by normalising obedience and masking ethical responsibility beneath neutral, procedural speech. When language becomes a tool for routine

[85] Minnich, E.K. (2024). The Evil of Banality. Rowman & Littlefield.

rather than reflection, it enables individuals to commit harm without recognising it as such—making atrocity possible through the dullness of unexamined words.

The banality of evil

In 'The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and 'The Final Solution'[86]', Bernard J. Bergen revisits one of the most controversial and misunderstood ideas in twentieth-century political thought. Hannah Arendt's phrase 'the banality of evil', first introduced in her 1963 book 'Eichmann in Jerusalem', ignited public outrage not only for its unsettling tone but for its disturbing implications. Many read her claim as a way of trivialising the Holocaust, but Bergen argues that Arendt's insight was neither reductive nor insensitive. Rather, it was a profound observation about the mechanics of modern evil—its ordinariness, its procedural nature, and above all, its thoughtlessness. The real provocation in Arendt's analysis lies not in diminishing the crimes of the Nazis but in her refusal to see Adolf Eichmann as a monstrous exception. Instead, she presents him as terrifyingly normal—a man whose evil arose not from ideology or sadism, but from a failure to think. Eichmann had abdicated his capacity for judgment, retreating into clichés, bureaucratic roles, and obedience to orders. He was a man so embedded in systems of power and authority that he no longer considered the consequences of his actions. He simply did his job. Arendt's critics were sharply divided. Some interpreted her concept as a dire warning: under the right conditions, any ordinary person might become complicit in atrocity. Others saw it as a moral evasion, reducing the Holocaust to a set of abstract social mechanisms and downplaying the singularity of Jewish suffering. But both camps, Bergen suggests, missed the depth of Arendt's thinking. Her claim was not psychological or historical; it was philosophical. She questioned the very possibility of moral agency in a world where individuals no longer confront their actions through reflective judgment. The real danger Arendt identified was not ideological extremism but moral emptiness—a vacuum at the centre of human behaviour where conscience should reside. Eichmann's banality was not in his crimes but in his language, his manner, his inability to imagine alternatives. For Arendt, thinking is not a luxury; it is a moral imperative. Thoughtlessness, when institutionalised, becomes a mechanism of mass murder. The Final Solution was not only a political catastrophe but an existential crisis for the modern subject. Bergen positions Arendt's idea within her broader philosophical trajectory, stretching from 'The Origins of Totalitarianism' to her unfinished 'The Life of the Mind'. The banality of evil is not a theory of history but a meditation on what it means to act without thinking. Totalitarian systems, in this view, do not merely dominate bodies or impose laws—they annihilate judgment, erode individuality, and reduce people to replaceable functions. Arendt's radical claim is that such systems do not require demonic leaders or zealous followers—just enough people willing to stop asking questions.

Inhuman Thoughts

In 'Inhuman Thoughts: Philosophical Explorations of Posthumanity[87]', Asher Seidel proposes a provocative re-evaluation of what it means to be human by exploring the possibility—and perhaps desirability—of evolving beyond humanity itself. Rather than dwelling on traditional notions of cruelty or moral depravity often associated with 'inhumanity', Seidel uses the term to reflect on non-human or post-human modes of existence, challenging

[86] Bergen, B. J. (1998) The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and "The Final Solution". Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
[87] Seidel, A. (2010) Inuman Thoughts: Philosophical Explorations of Posthumanity. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

the moral assumptions that typically frame such discussions. These speculative essays invite readers to consider whether the human condition, in all its limitations, should be preserved—or transformed. The idea of improvement animates Seidel's early essays. Observing the intellectual struggles of students, he contemplates the biological and cognitive boundaries of human thought. From this point, he explores theoretical enhancements to perception, reasoning, and emotional life, questioning whether a more refined or extended consciousness might allow people to overcome the incoherence, confusion, and moral dissonance that often define human experience. This approach diverges from conventional philosophical ethics, which tends to assume the permanence of human nature. Instead, Seidel treats the human as mutable, improvable, and perhaps even replaceable. His speculations range from relatively plausible extensions of human life to radically unfamiliar post-human states. Essays such as 'Facing Immortality' consider the consequences of dramatically extended lifespans—not merely the fear of endless boredom, but the moral recalibration such a transformation would require. Others, like 'Parallel Consciousness', imagine minds capable of simultaneously maintaining multiple streams of thought, thereby restructuring identity and the limits of personal autonomy. These imagined futures strain the boundary between philosophical reasoning and science fiction, but Seidel argues that speculative philosophy, even when improbable, serves an essential purpose: pushing the edges of thought. Critics of such work might dismiss it as impractical or escapist. Seidel acknowledges this charge but insists that uselessness is not a flaw. Human societies have always supported intellectual activities—poetry, abstract mathematics, music—that do not produce immediate utility. Speculative philosophy may not guide policy, but it expands the conceptual space in which future ideas and institutions might be born. One of the more disturbing essays, 'Alone and Without Love', imagines a post-human society devoid of sexuality, romantic attachment, or the desire for companionship. Seidel offers no easy answers about whether this vision is desirable. Instead, he treats it as an occasion to reflect on what gives current human life its texture—desire, vulnerability, dependence—and how those features could be altered in unexpected ways. Ethical questions recur throughout the collection. If humans become immune to suffering or no longer require social bonds, what becomes of ethics itself? Would moral reasoning disappear in a world where harm is obsolete, or would new forms of value emerge? Seidel suggests that ethics, like humanity, must be subject to revision. To ask 'what is the point of ethics?' is to ask what people aspire to become.

Human dignity violated

In 'Human Dignity Violated', a chapter from the volume 'Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanisation[88]', the contributors argue for a 'negative approach' to the concept of human dignity, emphasising its violation as the most revealing entry point for understanding its meaning and moral weight. Rather than grounding dignity in metaphysical or rationalist principles—as in traditional philosophical accounts—the authors focus on concrete acts of humiliation, degradation, and abuse that provoke strong moral responses. This method roots the concept in real-world experiences and reveals why dignity matters so deeply to people. Human dignity, though often treated as a foundational ethical and legal value, remains conceptually elusive. While philosophical frameworks have linked it to autonomy, rationality, or divine creation, these abstractions can seem disconnected from the emotional and moral force that dignity carries in public life. What gives dignity its urgency is not philosophical clarity but the visceral recognition of its absence—in torture, slavery, poverty, exclusion, or even the small

[88] Stoecker, R. (ed.) (2011) Human Dignity Violated, in Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization: Human Dignity Violated. Dordrecht: Springer.

but cruel everyday humiliations inflicted on vulnerable individuals. This is the essence of the negative approach: by analysing the conditions under which people feel their dignity has been violated, one can begin to understand the role dignity plays in human life. Avishai Margalit's idea of a 'decent society'—one that avoids humiliating its members—is foundational here. Dignity is not an isolated trait but a relational and embodied value: it concerns how people are seen, treated, and recognised in their social world. The book's first part explores general forms of dignity violation, such as objectification, degradation, and loss of social recognition. Scholars show how these violations are not just interpersonal but structural, embedded in systems of labour, law, or politics. One key insight is that humiliation can deprive people not only of autonomy but of their symbolic existence—making them feel invisible or worthless. The second part turns to specific practices: torture, rape, poverty, and labour exploitation. These chapters demonstrate how deeply institutionalised some forms of dignity violation are and how abstract ethical principles often fail to account for the lived experience of those subjected to them. For example, rape jurisprudence may frame the crime in terms of consent or bodily integrity, but such categories do not fully capture the profound degradation it entails. Dignity, in this context, helps express the full moral injury. Finally, the book's third part engages critically with the concept itself. Can dignity remain a useful moral category without falling into vagueness or redundancy? Some contributors suggest that a renewed understanding of dignity must incorporate vulnerability, social recognition, and embodied subjectivity, while others call for more precise philosophical definitions. Despite these tensions, there is broad agreement that any future account of dignity must begin with the ways it is violated. The value of this negative approach lies in its refusal to treat dignity as a self-evident or purely theoretical notion. Instead, it makes the moral reality of degradation central. Dignity matters because people know what it feels like to be stripped of it.

Non-banality of evil

While modern totalitarianism is often associated with the horrors of Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia, Steven Saxonberg's comparative analysis broadens this framework by tracing totalitarian patterns back to the pre-modern era. In 'Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil[89]', Saxonberg draws on historical case studies to challenge two prevailing assumptions: that totalitarianism is an exclusively modern phenomenon, and that those who commit evil under such regimes do so out of bureaucratic indifference, echoing Hannah Arendt's thesis of the 'banality of evil'. Instead, Saxonberg argues that both modern and pre-modern forms of totalitarianism rely on deeply ideological structures and active participation in repression—not passive obedience. The Spanish Inquisition exemplifies a pre-modern totalitarian system. Unlike France's papal inquisition, which remained largely under ecclesiastical control, the Spanish version became integrated into the machinery of state-building. It demanded not only outward conformity but inward conviction. Heretics were not merely punished for public disobedience but for incorrect belief, monitored and coerced through systematic surveillance, anonymous accusations, and performative rituals of piety. In Saxonberg's view, the Inquisition's ambition to control thought and conscience places it squarely within the totalitarian tradition. The book's key insight is that totalitarianism should not be defined by its modern tools—mass media, industrial surveillance, or single-party states—but by its ambition to monopolise truth and enforce ideological purity. Saxonberg lays out four criteria to identify totalitarian regimes across eras: a totalising ideology, a structure of enforcement, a politicised belief system, and the use of fear as a mechanism of control. This

[89] Saxonberg, S. (2023) Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil, Springer.

broader conceptualisation allows for meaningful comparisons between the Inquisition and modern regimes like Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. Each, though historically distinct, shares the core aspiration of molding society through coercion and ideological conformity. Saxonberg's comparative method highlights why some states evolve into totalitarian regimes while others do not. Central to his argument is the role of state-building. Newly unified or unstable states—like post-Reconquista Spain or interwar Germany—often face crises of legitimacy. In such conditions, totalitarianism becomes a strategy for creating social cohesion by enforcing ideological unity and identifying internal enemies. The Spanish monarchy relied on the Inquisition to forge a Catholic national identity, while Nazi Germany weaponised antisemitic ideology to unify a fractured populace. By contrast, more established states like France and Sweden, with longer histories of governance and political inclusion, had less need to rely on coercive ideology. Their political systems, however flawed, had mechanisms that absorbed dissent without turning to repression. Saxonberg also critiques the explanatory power of cultural theories, such as those that locate German totalitarianism in Lutheran authoritarianism or France's resistance to it in Enlightenment liberalism. Such narratives, he argues, fail to account for the fact that Sweden, arguably more Lutheran and hierarchical than Germany, developed a democratic tradition. The Sonderweg theory, which suggests Germany's unique historical trajectory predisposed it to authoritarianism, also falters when compared to Spain, whose authoritarian past did not follow the same path. Instead, Saxonberg suggests that institutional configurations, especially the inclusivity or exclusivity of state-building, play a more decisive role than national character or religious heritage. The book also reconsiders Arendt's notion of evil as banal, particularly in bureaucratic systems where individuals follow orders without moral reflection. Saxonberg argues that many perpetrators in both pre-modern and modern totalitarian systems were not passive cogs but willing agents, actively participating in, and even expanding the machinery of repression. Whether inquisitors in Spain or Gestapo officers in Germany, these individuals often displayed ideological zeal, creative cruelty, and personal ambition. Their evil, in other words, was anything but banal—it was deliberate and rationalised within a coherent, if twisted, worldview. By tracing continuities across time and regimes, Saxonberg builds a robust theory of totalitarianism that is both historically grounded and flexible enough to account for diverse contexts. His analysis does not flatten the differences between religious and secular regimes, or between modern and pre-modern institutions, but rather identifies a shared structure of ideological totalism that transcends specific epochs. He concludes that totalitarianism is not merely a political form but a moral disorder—a regime-wide effort to annihilate dissent, individuality, and complexity in favour of an artificial unity imposed by fear and dogma. Through its comparative depth and theoretical rigor, 'Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism, and the Non-Banality of Evil' complicates simplistic narratives of modernity and evil. It offers a powerful reminder that the capacity for ideological violence is not confined to any one period or system but recurs wherever power seeks to dominate the human soul. Totalitarianism is not a product of modernity; it is a method of governance that transcends eras, uniting state power and ideological conformity in a brutal symphony of enforced belief.

Evilness

Steven Saxonberg argues that totalitarian regimes, particularly those formed during periods of political instability, often rely on deliberately orchestrated acts of evil to consolidate their power and legitimacy. These acts are not incidental but strategically deployed against targeted groups framed as existential threats. Drawing from historical examples such as Nazi Germany and the Spanish Inquisition, Saxonberg challenges the notion that evil under

totalitarianism is banal or exclusive to modernity. Instead, he presents a theory in which state-building efforts frequently weaponise ideological purity and societal fear to achieve unity and obedience. Traditional explanations often tie atrocities to modern bureaucratic or technological systems. Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, emphasised how modern rationality enabled the Holocaust to function as an efficient killing machine. Yet, as Saxonberg points out, much of the violence committed during the Holocaust was not industrial but personal—shootings by police and soldiers, starvation, and neglect. Moreover, evil in history is not limited to modern examples. In ancient literature like Homer's 'Iliad', Agamemnon openly calls for the extermination of the Trojan people, even unborn children. These accounts suggest that collective acts of evil have deeper political and sociological roots, predating the modern era. Saxonberg defines evil not as a theological category, but in secular, sociopolitical terms. Drawing on the work of scholars like Waller, he frames evil as the intentional and systematic infliction of suffering on defenceless victims, sanctioned by political or religious authorities. This definition broadens the scope of analysis to include not only genocide but also cultural erasure, forced conversions, and exclusionary state practices that devastate communities. Spain's Inquisition, for example, did not exterminate Jews and Muslims en masse but forcibly converted, expelled, and erased their cultures—clearly qualifying as a form of state-sponsored evil under this lens. At the heart of Saxonberg's thesis is the idea that totalitarian regimes are often born from political fragility. New states lacking historical legitimacy must invent cohesive narratives and identities. They do this by identifying outgroups, dehumanising them, and presenting them as threats to the national fabric. Acts of collective violence become not only tolerated but expected, offering the majority a sense of unity and purpose. The state becomes protector and purifier, and participation in violence is framed as a duty rather than a crime. Cultural prejudices play an enabling role in this process, but Saxonberg insists they are insufficient causes on their own. Spain and Germany, both deeply unstable at key historical moments, activated latent prejudices to rally support for state-building projects. France and Sweden, by contrast, were more politically established and secure, making the instrumental use of ideology and fear less urgent and less effective. In this view, evil is not the product of faceless bureaucrats or the machinery of modernity alone, but a strategic tool used by fragile regimes to manufacture legitimacy and obedience. Rather than being banal, it is methodical, deliberate, and deeply political—rooted in the very architecture of state-building. 'Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil' explores how totalitarian regimes mobilise societies to commit atrocities by crafting a sense of existential threat around targeted outgroups. The central claim is that such acts of 'evil' are most likely when the state itself is fragile or newly formed, seeking legitimacy through unifying ideologies. Nazi Germany exemplifies this pattern, as the regime constructed a political religion that dehumanised Jews and depicted them as enemies of the nation, drawing heavily on older anti-Semitic religious traditions and repackaging them as pseudo-scientific racial theories. The chapter critiques the simplistic notion that perpetrators of genocide are merely conformists or passive agents. It shows that many participants had long careers shaped by violence and authoritarian ideology. Individuals like Rudolf Höss, who commanded Auschwitz, had already been part of extremist paramilitary groups and embraced Nazi ideology wholeheartedly. Even 'desk murderers' like Alfred Meyer were not neutral administrators but ideologically committed actors who shaped and directed extermination policies. Religious and regional differences also played a role. In Austria, for instance, pan-Germanic nationalism and Catholic anti-Semitism merged to form an especially aggressive racial ideology. In contrast, Protestant Germany's nationalism was less expansionist, though still vulnerable to the Nazis' racial propaganda. Saxonberg argues that such nuances are essential for understanding the mechanisms of complicity. Ultimately, the Nazi state succeeded

in legitimising genocide not through brute force alone, but through a complex system of indoctrination, dehumanisation, and ideological manipulation. Perpetrators believed in the moral necessity of their actions, and their sense of duty was rooted in the perceived legitimacy of the regime. The key to understanding their actions lies not in reducing them to mindless functionaries, but in acknowledging how belief, authority, and moral framing converge in totalitarian systems. 'Pre-Modernity, Totalitarianism and the Non-Banality of Evil' offers a sobering reassessment of how modern states can create the conditions for ordinary people to commit extraordinary crimes—not despite their humanity, but by reconfiguring it around the moral logic of the state's survival.

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